

## RNIB Scotland Response to the Scottish Government Skills Delivery Independent Review: Call for Evidence, December 2022

### 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 visually impaired children and adults and help them to live full and independent lives, campaigning for their rights.

People with sight loss tell us that the issues around employment are one of the biggest barriers they face in life. Blind and partially sighted people are much less likely to be in paid employment than the general working-age population or people with other disabilities.

Ergo, we welcome the opportunity to respond to this Call for Evidence and have replied to Questions 4, 6, 20 and 21.

We highlight key evidence from RNIB’s “Employment facts and stats report 2020”. [[1]](#footnote-1) This shows people with sight loss are under-represented in the workforce and why so many are leaving work at the onset of sight loss or with a deterioration in their vision. We consider some of the challenges, perceptions and barriers faced by people with sight loss in finding and thriving in employment. We also outline the new UK Curriculum Framework for Children and Young people with a Vision Impairment (CFVI) which aims to support blind and partially sighted children and young people access an appropriate and equitable education.

## Questions

### Question 4: Thinking about how our economy and society is changing and the Scottish Government’s ambitions for a skilled workforce as set out in NSET, do you have any evidence on where the current skills and education landscape needs to adapt or change and how it could be improved? Please provide evidence to support your answer.

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.[[2]](#footnote-2) Research suggests that around 10 per cent of eligible people do not register making the true figure as of 2010 closer to 40,000.

The most recent RNIB Sight Loss Data Tool states that at present there are around 183,000 people living with sight loss in Scotland. [[3]](#footnote-3) This figure is likely to increase over the next decade, with estimates suggesting there will be at least 214,000 people will be living with a visual impairment in Scotland by 2032. The projected increase in sight loss is linked to having an ageing population.

At the same time, RNIB’s “Employment facts and stats report 2020” [[4]](#footnote-4) shows that people are working later in life:

* The employment rate of people aged 65 and over has more than doubled since 2000. [[5]](#footnote-5)
* The state pension age will be 67 by 2028. [[6]](#footnote-6)
* One-third of people expect to work in their current job with same hours after they had reached State Pension age. [[7]](#footnote-7)

Together, these trends mean that over the next few years, there will be more older people working later in life when acquired sight loss becomes more prevalent.

The employment rate and the number of blind and partially sighted people in work hasn’t changed significantly in a generation. One in four registered blind and partially sighted people are in employment, and this hasn’t changed much since similar research was carried out in 1991. [[8]](#footnote-8)

There is a significant employment gap between blind and partially sighted people and the general population. The employment rate is 76 per cent in the general population, 51 per cent amongst the disabled population excluding sight loss and 27 per cent for people registered blind and partially sighted. [[9]](#footnote-9)

Some factors influence the likelihood of being in work: age; educational attainment; severity of sight loss; additional disabilities and general health. Registered blind and partially sighted people with a degree or higher still only have the same chance of getting a job as someone with no qualifications in the general public. [[10]](#footnote-10)

The age at which someone experiences sight loss influences the challenges they face, either in entry to the job market or job retention.

People born blind or who lost their sight in childhood are less likely to ever enter the labour market, with 76 per cent of this group ever having a job compared to 96 per cent of people who lost their sight over the age of 30. However, it is very likely other factors influence this such as additional disabilities. [[11]](#footnote-11)

People with sight loss face many barriers looking for work. Assumptions and low expectation levels from employers, or concerns about the cost of adjustments, are common misconceptions. Job adverts and application processes can also be inaccessible. Further barriers

include ability and confidence in travelling and in accessing opportunities, unconscious barriers in the recruitment and application processes, and access to skills building in areas such as information technology.

To address this, RNIB has recently launched a Visibly Better Employer quality standard that details the steps needed to ensure that recruitment methods are accessible and that attempts are made to keep people at work. The standards include checking that:

* job vacancies are advertised on websites and publications that are accessible and user-friendly for blind and partially sighted people.
* the content of your recruitment pack and the process for applying for a job are accessible to blind and partially sighted people.
* new and existing employees who are blind or partially sighted have everything in place to enable them to do their job. [[12]](#footnote-12)

Most people with sight loss and in work said that they had had some form of adjustment made to help them to do their job. Four out of five have had special aids, equipment or other adaptations made to their working environment.

People newly diagnosed with a sight-loss condition are unlikely to be aware of the range of technology and other supports which can help them at work and an employer who has never dealt with this situation might not know how to help their employee or where to go for advice.

Providing specialist software or equipment, such as a video magnifier, could be all that’s needed. Or using screen magnification software to change a PC display, could make using a computer much more straightforward and productive.

For employees with more sever sight loss, or people whose sight further deteriorates, it can help to explore options such as using a screen reader rather than magnifier software, which might no longer be suitable for them. Further specialist training in the use of technology could help the employee to stay in their job.

For some people, adjusting lighting levels around the workstation can make a big difference. For others, small changes to their job could make a significant difference, and some of their duties could be reassigned to other staff.

Within this, the Access to Work scheme plays a crucial role. [[13]](#footnote-13)

It is concerning that there is low awareness of the scheme. RNIB’s survey of 500 employers in 2019 found that only 32 per cent of employers agreed that they would know how to access funding to cover the extra costs of practical support for employees who are blind or partially sighted. There was a low awareness of Access to Work, particularly among small organisations; 44 per cent for large employers and 18 per cent for small employers. [[14]](#footnote-14)

As RNIB’s Heather Barbara pointed out in a recent article:

“It need not be hard to keep people with sight loss in work. With advances in assistive technology and financial support from the government’s Access to Work scheme, keeping an employee with sight loss in their job can be easier and more cost effective than you might think.” [[15]](#footnote-15)

### Question 6: Do you have any evidence relating to the outcomes of the current funding and delivery of apprenticeship programmes (Modern Apprenticeships, Foundation Apprenticeships and Graduate Apprenticeships) in terms of either outcomes for learners and/or the needs of employers?

The RNIB Employment Team has found that apprenticeships exclude people with sight loss. Employers select apprentices without the knowledge to support them. Skills Development Scotland has tried to address this, funding initiatives to target specific groups but those organisations that support people and their employers do not have capacity to provide support.

### Question 20: Do you have any evidence to inform how the new Careers by Design Collaborative could be embedded within the wider education and skills system and delivery landscape to enable the recommendations of the Careers Review to be taken forward to ensure people can access the advice, information and guidance that they need?

There is a gap in the provision of careers advice and a need for specialist careers advice for young people with sight loss. Please see further below.

### Question 21: Alongside Careers information, advice and guidance, do you have any evidence to demonstrate what additional support young people, including those from marginalised groups, might need to develop their skills and experience to prepare them for the world of work? Please include details about who you think should be responsible for providing this support.

Through our work with blind and partially sighted children and young people we are aware of the need to identify solutions to the problems that children and young people with disabilities can face transitioning from secondary education.

There are several crucial transition points such as moving from home to school, from primary to secondary education and moving on beyond secondary education. We suggest that a universal plan should apply to all these transition points and would have a wider benefit if applied to all pupils. Transitions should be looked at holistically evaluating the support which should be provided to the young person, parents and guardians, siblings and school, college and university staff involved in the transition. Any work in this area should build on existing good practice.

The Scottish Government’s Pupil Census 2021 revealed that there were 4,930 school-pupils with a visual impairment in Scotland. [[16]](#footnote-16) The attainment gap between children and young people with a vision impairment and their peers without additional support needs remains unacceptably wide.

Qualified Teachers of Children and Young People with a Vision Impairment (QTVIs) offer specialist support to ensure that pupils with vision impairment can access both the national Scottish curriculum and develop essential life skills.

These skills and resources are being formally identified in a UK Specialist Visual Impairment Curriculum Framework, developed as part of a sector-wide initiative led by RNIB.

The new Curriculum Framework for Children and Young people with a Vision Impairment (CFVI) was developed in collaboration with parents, children, and young people along with professionals from a range of disciplines and experiences working for major sight sector organisations and networks across the UK. These included cross-border charities such as RNIB; Guide Dogs UK; and the Thomas Pocklington Trust. The Scottish Association for Visual Impairment Education (SAVIE); the Scottish Sensory Centre (SSC); and the University of Edinburgh have also been involved. [[17]](#footnote-17)

The Framework aims to support children and young people with vision impairment access an appropriate and equitable education, presenting outcomes within 11 teaching areas:

* Facilitating an Inclusive World
* Sensory Development
* Communication
* Literacy
* Habilitation: Orientation and Mobility
* Habilitation: Independent Living Skills
* Accessing information
* Technology
* Health: Social, Emotional, Mental and Physical Wellbeing
* Social, Sports and Leisure
* Preparing for Adulthood

It provides a shared vocabulary to be used by children and young people, their families and professionals in the UK who work with them. A shared vocabulary supports both better communication and purpose.

At the heart of the Framework is a set of three fundamental aims:

* To help clarify and define the elements of specialist skill development, interventions and best practice support that are considered to be essential for children and young people with vision impairment;
* To assist qualified specialist practitioners in raising the awareness amongst other professionals and parents of the need for children and young people with vision impairment to be taught skills that enable them to access the curriculum and the wider world with as much independence as possible;
* To aid discussions and understanding amongst all involved in a child/young person’s education of how and when these skills should be taught by suitably qualified specialists and reinforced by non-specialists.

Each element of the Framework is aimed at helping children and young people acquire the skills they need to prepare for adulthood. [[18]](#footnote-18)

Haggeye is RNIB Scotland's campaign group for blind and partially sighted young people, aged 16-27 years, living in Scotland. As a national group, members come together online from across Scotland every fortnight. A Haggeye meeting underlined the importance of having a planned and monitored process for transition to adulthood. The following statements have been anonymised:

* One member received 11 years of support while at primary and secondary school but “when it came to leaving school, the support vanished”.
* Another came from England but registered with Glasgow Sensory Service to get mobility training before moving to study in Glasgow. They “still haven't had this support” and emphasised the need for mobility and orientation at the transition point. They thought there was a “postcode lottery in terms of whether you can get support or not”.
* The Haggeye members referred to the difficulties of social care services not yet fully restarting post-Covid.
* Another said that she felt fortunate to have an extra year at school after losing her sight in her sixth year and to have the support of a QTVI and use of a Vision Book and magnifier. However, at college she found “one lecturer was very hostile to disability”, providing information in Font size 8. [[19]](#footnote-19)

RNIB Scotland will be working with colleagues to promote the Framework approach over the next three years in the hope that it might be incorporated into Scottish government guidance.

## For further information contact:

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1. Employment facts and stats 2020. London: Royal National Institute of Blind People (RNIB), 2020. ohaw.co/RNIBemp2020. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. A National Statistics Publication for Scotland: Registered Blind and Partially Sighted Persons, Scotland 2010, Scottish Government, 2010. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See https://www.rnib.org.uk/professionals/health-social-care-education-professionals/knowledge-and-research-hub/sight-loss-data-tool/. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Employment facts and stats 2020. London: Royal National Institute of Blind People (RNIB), 2020. ohaw.co/RNIBemp2020. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Office for National Statistics (2020) [Employment rate 65+ people](https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employmentandemployeetypes/timeseries/lfk6/lms). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. HM Government (2014) [State Pension age timetable](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/state-pension-age-timetable/state-pension-age-timetable). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Age UK (2017) [Creating a career MOT at 50](https://www.ageuk.org.uk/latest-news/articles/2017/october/half-of-uk-workers-aged-40-64-wont-have-enough-money-to-retire-when-they-reach-their-state-pension-age/). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Slade, Edwards, and Crawley (2020) Employment for blind and partially sighted people in 2019. RNIB. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Slade (2019) Labour Force Survey 2018: comparison of people with sight loss to the rest of the population. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Slade, Edwards and White (2017) Employment status and sight loss. RNIB. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Slade, Edwards, and Crawley (2020), op cit. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. https://www.rnib.org.uk/living-with-sight-loss/equality-and-employment/employers/visibly-better-employer-quality-standard/. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. https://www.gov.uk/access-to-work. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Slade, Edwards, and Crawley (2020) Employment for blind and partially sighted people in 2019. RNIB. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Heather Barbara, Sight Loss and Employment: Part Two The Role of Occupational Health, Occupational Health at Work 2022; 19(2). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. https://www.gov.scot/publications/pupil-census-supplementary-statistics/. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. See rnib.org.uk/professionals/health-social-care-education-professionals/education-professionals/curriculum-framework-for-children-and-young-people-with-vision-impairment/#:~:text=The%20Curriculum%20Framework%20for%20Children,Sensory. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. [RNIB Scotland response to the Scottish Parliament - Disabled Children and Young People (Transitions to Adulthood) (Scotland) Bill – detailed call for views - October 2022](https://www.rnib.org.uk/documents/1378/RNIB_Scotland_Transitions_to_Adulthood_Scotland.docx). [↑](#footnote-ref-19)