

# A Vision for the 2020s Focus on sight loss


**RNIB**

Scotland

See differently

**RNIB Scotland's Manifesto  
for the 2021 Scottish Parliament election**





RNIB Scotland is the country's leading sight loss charity. We campaign on behalf of blind and partially sighted people to raise awareness of the issues they face, and we work in partnership with public, private and third sector bodies across Scotland to deliver projects and services.

RNIB Scotland supports blind and partially sighted children and adults throughout Scotland to live fully and independently.

We support people newly diagnosed with sight loss to find their lives again, provide advice on welfare benefits and on retaining employment, transcribe books and other materials into audio, braille and large print, campaign to improve the life chances of people with sight loss, and work to prevent avoidable sight loss.

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.



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# Introduction

The next Scottish Parliament will convene in a changed world. A world forced to re-evaluate things we've previously taken for granted. A world in which everyone has been made more aware of how dependent we are on each other.

In Scotland we have an opportunity to re-consider our own priorities and build on that sense of greater cohesiveness the coronavirus crisis has engendered.

This manifesto sets out key steps that can make Scotland more inclusive for blind and partially sighted people. The steps are straightforward; the costs relatively modest. But the gains for some of the most vulnerable in our society would be far-reaching and profound.

Health services that prevent avoidable sight loss when they can and help people come to terms with it when they cannot. Information that's available in alternative formats. Public transport that's always accessible. Education that helps every child reach their full potential. Employment enhanced by a better understanding of what people with sight loss are capable of. Streets and thoroughfares that allow pedestrians to walk safely and without obstacles.

If the recent crisis has exacerbated the problems blind and partially sighted people face, it's brought to the fore, too, some of the best instincts of our society. That generosity of spirit can be the spur for a new deal for people with sight loss and other disabilities.

Let's make that a lasting legacy of the parliamentary term ahead.



**Sandra Wilson**  
Convener –  
RNIB Scotland



**James Adams**  
Director –  
RNIB Scotland

# Asks

## Preventing sight loss

- Eye health examinations to remain free to everyone in Scotland.
- A new public campaign to raise awareness of eye-health and the importance of getting your eyes tested.
- Ensure access to effective treatments is given in time to save sight, and that new treatments are evaluated for approval as quickly as possible.
- Resource capacity within the eye-treatment journey to ensure treatment within the NHS is effective and timely.

## Living with sight loss

- Establish a National Low Vision Plan, modelled on the Welsh Low Vision Service, to enable more consistent service provision across Scotland.
- Prevent further health inequalities and increasing pressure on the NHS in Scotland by providing equal access to low vision assessments within primary and secondary eye care services.
- Ensure that all patients diagnosed with sight loss have access to a consistent standard of support, with funded and trained Eye Clinic Liaison Officers available in every health board area in Scotland.

- Work with COSLA, the visual impairment sector, Optometry Scotland and other relevant bodies, to review the utility and function of blind and partially sighted registers.

## Ensuring health information is accessible for all

- Create a cross-government accessibility standard ensuring all documents and communications are available in alternative formats, – including braille, large-print and audio - according to individual preference.
- Ensure that accessible health information policies and procedures are in place to support people with sight loss.
- Introduce mandatory training for healthcare staff to understand the impact different types of sight loss can have on communication with patients; and encourage sight loss awareness training across the wider public sector.

# Asks

## Creating a fairer social security system

- Grant applicants with a sight loss condition an ongoing entitlement, unless effective treatment becomes available, or if the applicant opts to be reassessed because their condition has worsened.
- Fund independent advocacy and advice services to help claimants get the support they are entitled to.
- Ensure that assistance adequately compensates for the cost of living with the sight loss condition and maintain the mobility component of assistance for people who face barriers to moving about independently, regardless of age.
- Ensure those assessing claimant eligibility for benefits receive training on the specific difficulties faced by people with different degrees of sight loss.

## Ensuring transport is accessible to all

- Provide bus drivers with mandatory disability awareness training to assist passengers with disabilities.
- Produce information about bus services and timetables in accessible formats, including braille, large-print and audio on request.
- Support the introduction of audio and visual announcements on buses.

## Educating children and young people with sight loss

- That the Scottish Government report annually on the attainment figures for blind and partially sighted school-pupils.
- Maintain a Scottish Government database of active Qualified Teachers of Children and Young People with a Visual Impairment (QTVIs) by the local authority they are based in and the number of hours they work.
- Invest in training more QTVIs as a matter of urgency to improve the ratio of QTVIs to pupils with a vision impairment and provide incentives to complete QTVI training.
- Support students with a visual impairment to take part in the mandatory two hours of physical education a week and extra-curricular activities, and monitor participation rates, and if lower, investigate why.

# Asks

## Widening opportunities for employment

- Develop a strategy to address the issue of only one in four blind and partially sighted people being in paid employment.
- Campaign to increase awareness of the Access to Work scheme among employers and show how businesses can apply to it to offset any additional costs in adapting the workplace to accommodate employees with a disability.
- Ensure blind and partially sighted young people are given support to take part in mainstream programmes and recognise the need for specialist support in schemes such as the Fair Start Scotland Employment Programme, with training to enable employment professionals to provide this support.
- Secure the future of supported businesses, enabled through use of Article 20 of the EU Procurement Directive, post-Brexit. Supported businesses can help to generate employment opportunities for people with sight loss.

## Making our streets accessible to all

- Keep infrastructure accessible by maintaining a minimum 60mm kerb with intermittent dropped kerbs, controlled crossings across roads and, where applicable, cycle lanes, and review bus stop design to inform new planning and construction guidance that ensures safe access.
- Halt the building of shared space schemes where pedestrians, cycles and vehicle traffic occupy the same levelled area.
- Implement the pavement parking ban, legislated for by the Transport (Scotland) Act 2019, by the end of 2021.
- Introduce a national advertising (A)-board ban with advice on alternative advertising for businesses.
- Reserve pavements for pedestrians and focus on utilising road space for the development of cycle lanes.

## Ensuring people with sight loss can vote independently

- Continue to work with all relevant electoral authorities to create the optimum accessible voting solution.
- Continue to include people with sight loss in Scottish Government plans to improve access to voting.
- Ensure whatever accessible voting solutions created by the pilots work for all blind and partially sighted people.



## Preventing sight loss

Around 178,000 people in Scotland are estimated to have serious sight loss – by 2050, with no intervention beyond current provision, this could double due to the increase in the elderly population and a variety of health factors.

Ophthalmology is already Scotland's largest outpatient speciality. Demand for eye health services continues to increase, with more people waiting longer to be seen.

If we are to contain preventable sight loss, we must raise awareness of the importance of maintaining good eye health. We urge the Scottish Government to work with public health and community structures to promote this.



### Asks

- Eye health examinations to remain free to everyone in Scotland.
- Launch a public campaign to raise awareness of eye-health and the importance of getting your eyes tested.
- Ensure access to effective treatments is given in time to save sight, and that new treatments are evaluated for approval as quickly as possible.
- Resource capacity within the eye-treatment journey to ensure treatment within the NHS is effective and timely.

## Living with sight loss

Age is a significant risk factor for vision loss and the number of people in Scotland aged 65 and over is projected to increase by 53 per cent over the next 25 years.

Low vision services enable people to regain or maintain as much independence and autonomy as possible. To align with the See Hear strategy, future planning must consider how to provide equitable access so that help is received in a timely manner.

**Every day in Scotland, 10 people begin to lose their sight, but only one in six will be offered support.**

Our Eye Clinic Liaison Officers (ECLOs) offer emotional and practical support to lessen the impact of sight loss, as well as acting as an important bridge between health and social services. With eye clinics stretched to capacity, healthcare staff often don't have time to provide this vital service, and a long-term, secure funding model is crucial.

Registers of blind and partially sighted people are held by each local authority to inform the provision of social work, rehabilitation and other services. However, digitisation and changing needs means we should now review the process and what the purpose of registration should be.

### Asks

- Establish a National Low Vision Plan, modelled on the Welsh Low Vision Service, to enable more consistent service provision across Scotland.
- Prevent further health inequalities and increasing pressure on the NHS in Scotland by providing equal access to low vision assessments within primary and secondary eye care services.
- Ensure that all patients diagnosed with sight loss have access to a consistent standard of support, with funded and trained Eye Clinic Liaison Officers available in every health board area in Scotland.
- Work with COSLA, the visual impairment sector, Optometry Scotland and other relevant bodies to review the utility and function of blind and partially sighted registers.



## Ensuring health information is accessible

Accessible information is vital for blind and partially sighted people to access what they need. The Scottish Government should ensure a clear, consistent policy on accessible information across the public sector.

In the NHS, patients rely on accessible communication to understand their health condition and its needs. But for people with sight loss, printed information is still too often inaccessible.

The Patient Rights (Scotland) Act 2011, and its accompanying Charter of Patient Rights and Responsibilities, set out that: "You have the right to be given information about your care and treatment in a format or language that meets your needs."

Not receiving information in one's preferred format can lead to people with sight loss not being able to self-manage and control their own healthcare needs, and patient confidentiality being compromised.



### Asks

- Create a cross-government accessibility standard ensuring all documents and communications are available in alternative formats, – including braille, large-print and audio – according to the preference an individual has registered.
- Ensure that accessible health information policies and procedures are in place to support people with sight loss.
- Introduce mandatory training for healthcare staff to understand the impact different types of sight loss can have on communication with patients; and encourage sight loss awareness training across the wider public sector.

# Creating a fairer social security system

The majority of social security assistance that blind and partially sighted people can apply for is devolved. We want it to be as easy and stress-free as possible for blind and partially sighted people to access the support they need to live independently.

In 2016, we successfully lobbied for an amendment to the Social Security (Scotland) Bill that ensures information and communications relating to Social Security Scotland is available in accessible formats including braille, large print, audio and easy read.

The requirement for periodic reassessments for benefit entitlement, however, remains a concern. The progress of many common sight loss conditions can be slowed but not reversed. Where their condition is not going to improve, claimants should only be required to undergo reassessments if they need additional support.

Living with sight loss can be expensive. Screen-reading software, accessible devices in the home and assistance aids all come at a premium. Social security support should reflect the extra cost of sight loss.



## Asks

- Grant applicants with a sight loss condition an ongoing entitlement, unless effective treatment becomes available, or if the applicant opts to be reassessed because their condition has worsened.
- Fund independent advocacy and advice services to help claimants get the support they are entitled to.
- Ensure that assistance adequately compensates for the cost of living with the sight loss condition and maintain the mobility component of assistance for people who face barriers to moving about independently, regardless of age.
- Ensure those assessing claimant eligibility for benefits receive training on the specific difficulties faced by people with different degrees of sight loss.

## Ensuring transport is accessible to all

Blind and partially sighted people still face barriers simply getting from A to B. As they are excluded from driving, public transport is essential in allowing most to connect with family, work and friends.

Buses remain by far the most popular form of public transport in Scotland. But taking the bus is not straightforward for visually impaired people.

The first barrier a passenger with sight loss faces is being able to read a timetable. These are often in a very small font-size with poor colour contrast, making them difficult or even impossible to read, even for someone with partial sight.

Getting on and off a bus can also present challenges. Nine out of ten people with sight loss told RNIB they could not see the number of an approaching bus in time to flag it down. And, once on board, it can be difficult to identify the desired stop without an audio prompt.



### Asks

- Provide bus drivers with mandatory disability awareness training to assist passengers with disabilities.
- Produce information about bus services and timetables in accessible formats, including braille, large-print and audio on request.
- Press for the introduction of audio and visual announcements on buses.

# Educating children and young people with sight loss

The Scottish Government's Pupil Census 2017 revealed that there were 4,331 school-pupils with a visual impairment in Scotland.

Sight loss does not limit a child's capacity to learn. But inaccessible learning materials, limited habilitation support, and exclusion from non-academic subjects and extra-curricular activities can.

The 2017/18 pupil census showed that the attainment gap between students with a visual impairment and their peers with no additional support needs is stark:

- Only one in 50 pupils with no additional support needs left school without a qualification at National 4 level or higher, compared to one in five with sight loss.
- 92 per cent of pupils with no additional needs achieved at least one qualification at National 5, compared to 64 per cent of those with a visual impairment.
- 71 per cent of pupils with no additional needs achieved at least one Higher, compared to only 40 per cent of those with sight loss.

Pupils with sight loss need additional support to develop habilitation, mobility and independent living skills from Qualified Teachers of Children and Young People with a Vision Impairment (QTVIs). This will allow them to transition confidently to further or higher education, or employment.

## Asks

- That the Scottish Government report annually on the attainment figures for blind and partially sighted school pupils.
- Maintain a Scottish Government database of active Qualified Teachers of Children and Young People with a Visual Impairment (QTVIs) by the local authority they are based in and the number of hours they work.
- Invest in training more QTVIs as a matter of urgency to improve the ratio of QTVIs to pupils with a vision impairment and provide incentives to complete QTVI training.
- Support students with a visual impairment to take part in the mandatory two hours of physical education a week and extra-curricular activities, and monitor participation rates, and if lower, investigate why.



# Widening opportunities for employment

RNIB's My Voice report found that the percentage of people with sight loss of working age and in paid employment decreased from 28 per cent in 2005 to 23 per cent in 2015.

People with sight loss face many barriers in gaining and retaining employment. These include low confidence and expectations, transport difficulties, access to skills training, access to assistive technology, and employer misperceptions about the range of work they can do.

Having the right adjustments in place is key to success in work for many blind and partially sighted people and closing the disability employment gap. It's essential employers know about support like the Access to Work programme which can pay for special equipment, adaptations or support worker services.

The future is likely to see a greater focus on remote and digital working, making it even more important that employers ensure that application forms, websites and video-conferencing facilities are accessible to blind and partially sighted people.



## Asks

- Develop a strategy to address the issue of only one in four blind and partially sighted people being in paid employment.
- Campaign to increase awareness of the Access to Work scheme among employers and show how businesses can apply to it to offset any additional costs in adapting the workplace to accommodate employees with a disability.
- Ensure blind and partially sighted young people are given support to take part in mainstream programmes and recognise the need for specialist support in schemes such as the Fair Start Scotland Employment Programme, with training to enable employment professionals to provide this support.
- Secure the future of supported businesses, enabled through use of Article 20 of the EU Procurement Directive, post-Brexit. Supported businesses can help to generate employment opportunities for people with sight loss.



# Making our streets accessible to all

Scotland's streetscapes are undergoing transformation. The commitment to increasing levels of cycling and walking are making new claims on public space.

We support the aim to increase levels of healthy activity and the move to zero-emission transport. However, we must ensure that our town centres are accessible to all. Our streets and pavements can be an obstacle course for people with sight loss and other disabilities. Advertising boards, street café furniture, dustbins, cars parked on pavements are just some of the hazards.

A third of blind and partially sighted people surveyed by RNIB said they had been injured by pavement obstacles when walking outside. Some felt so intimidated they ended up isolated in their homes.

The spread of bus stop designs that require passengers to either cross a cycle track to access a bus stop, or to stand on a cycle track to get on or off a bus, has increased the inaccessibility of public transport.

New infrastructure developments without physical delineation and controlled crossings also risk creating "no-go areas" for people with sight loss and other disabilities.



## Asks

- Keep infrastructure accessible by maintaining a minimum 60mm kerb with intermittent dropped kerbs, controlled crossings across roads and, where applicable, cycle lanes, and review bus stop design to inform new planning and construction guidance that ensures safe access.
- Halt the building of shared space schemes where pedestrians, cycles and vehicle traffic occupy the same levelled area.
- Implement the pavement parking ban, legislated for by the Transport (Scotland) Act 2019, by the end of 2021.
- Introduce a national advertising (A)-board ban with advice on alternative advertising for businesses.
- Reserve pavements for pedestrians and focus on utilising road space for the development of cycle lanes.

# Ensuring people with sight loss can vote independently

The right to vote independently, and in secret, is a cornerstone of our democracy. Yet blind and partially sighted people still face unacceptable barriers to exercising their democratic right to vote.

In the 2017 UK general election, 75 per cent of blind and partially sighted people surveyed by RNIB said that they could not vote independently and in secret. Instead, they had to either ask someone else for help in casting their vote or to place their mark for them, or not vote.

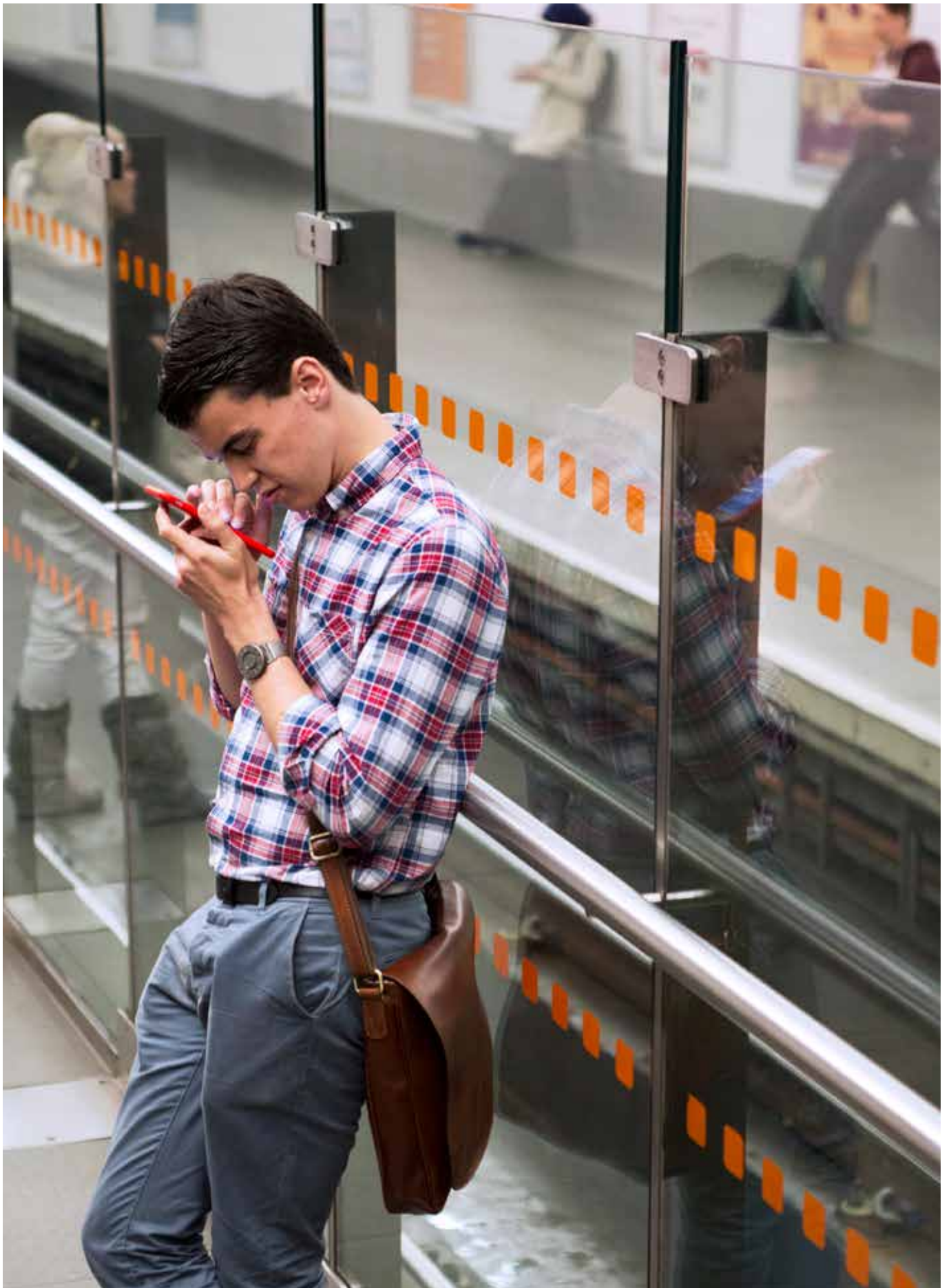
In 2020, amendments to the Scottish Elections (Reform) Bill that RNIB Scotland lobbied for passed with support from all the parties represented in the parliament.

As a result, there will now be pilots to develop an alternative method of voting which is accessible to blind or partially sighted people.

## Asks

- Continue to work with all relevant electoral authorities to create the optimum accessible voting solution.
- Continue to include people with sight loss in Scottish Government plans to improve access to voting.
- Ensure whatever accessible voting solutions created by the pilots work for all blind and partially sighted people.





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