



# Bridging the gap: your future, your vision, your choice



supporting blind and  
partially sighted people

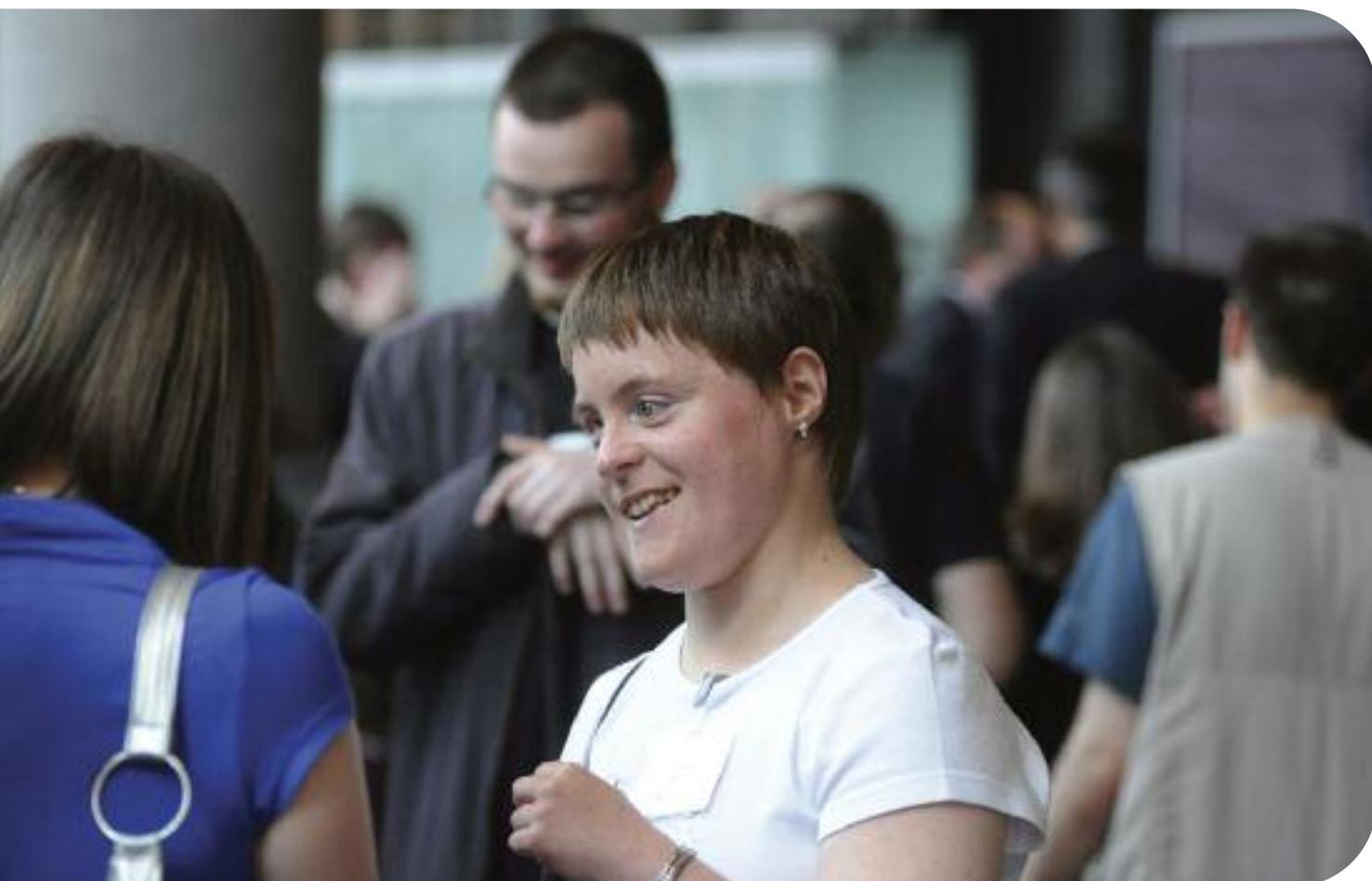


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# Bridging the gap

## Why this booklet has been developed

RNIB Scotland, with support from the Big Lottery Fund, has developed this resource in response to the work being carried out in Scotland around the transition of blind and partially sighted young people from school, Further and Higher Education into employment. All school leavers in Scotland face challenges to secure places in training, continued education or employment. For blind and partially sighted school leavers this is compounded by the high unemployment rates experienced by this group which is currently 67 per cent (This is Working 2 2009) and the fact that 90 per cent of employers consider it difficult or impossible to employ a blind or partially sighted person (Department for Work and Pensions Report Number 202).

Our employment services provide practical support to individual jobseekers as well as agencies and employers throughout the employment process, with advice on recruitment, support with staff development and awareness raising, and helping people retain their jobs if their sight deteriorates.

RNIB Scotland offers practical help to jobseekers offering one-to-one support to clients by brokering job-placements with employers, providing motivational and job-search skills, and mentoring on the job.

As part of our service provision we have two unique custom built skills and learning development centres with a range of fully accessible facilities based in Edinburgh and Glasgow.

RNIB Scotland's Employment and Learning Services supports employment work throughout Scotland by providing practical training, skills development and work preparation courses for jobseekers with sight problems. There is a wide range of support available, including motivational and job-seeking skills, preparation for the world of work, and enhancing communication and computer skills.



## Support for employers

RNIB Scotland helps employers support the recruitment of more blind and partially sighted people through the services we offer throughout Scotland. We provide information and advice on a variety of topics including, the reality of sight loss – facts and myths about blindness, guidelines on recruitment and selection, the Access to Work scheme, access technology.

We also offer a range of training courses aimed at raising positive awareness of issues faced by blind and partially sighted employees. We customise our training packages to suit the requirements of organisations and include subjects such as visual awareness, good practice in recruitment and selection, using access technology, legislative requirements in place.

RNIB Scotland's Focus on Transition report (2009) recommended that young people should be presented with a "menu" of interventions to support them in transition from secondary school. This booklet hopes to support that menu of options and support.

## Bridging the gap – what does it mean?

Think about your time at school. You'll be familiar with the staff that support you and the adjustments that are made to ensure you can access your subject materials. You may have worksheets and textbooks provided in large print or braille or perhaps you have a support teacher who takes notes for you in class. At school, both you and the staff at school are aware of the support that you need to ensure that your sight problems don't interfere with your learning. But have you thought much about what happens when you leave school and go on to college, university or work?

Think of your transition from school and beyond as a series of journeys from one stage to another. For example:

- school to employment
- school to college
- school to college to university to employment
- school to vocational training to employment.

The journeys that get you from one location to another are what we call your points of transition and it's important that you and the different agencies that support you plan for these times of change well in advance of them happening. This will ensure that your move from let's say sixth year to university is smooth and effective and that you're fully aware of what support you'll get and who will be responsible for providing it. Careful planning is also really important for practical reasons, for example to make sure that you have access to assistive technology, such as screen readers or magnification software from the outset of your course.

There is a lot of support out there but you may not be aware of it. Knowing what's available to help you enables you to take control of your future and allows you the freedom to make informed choices about what you want to do next.

# School life and planning ahead

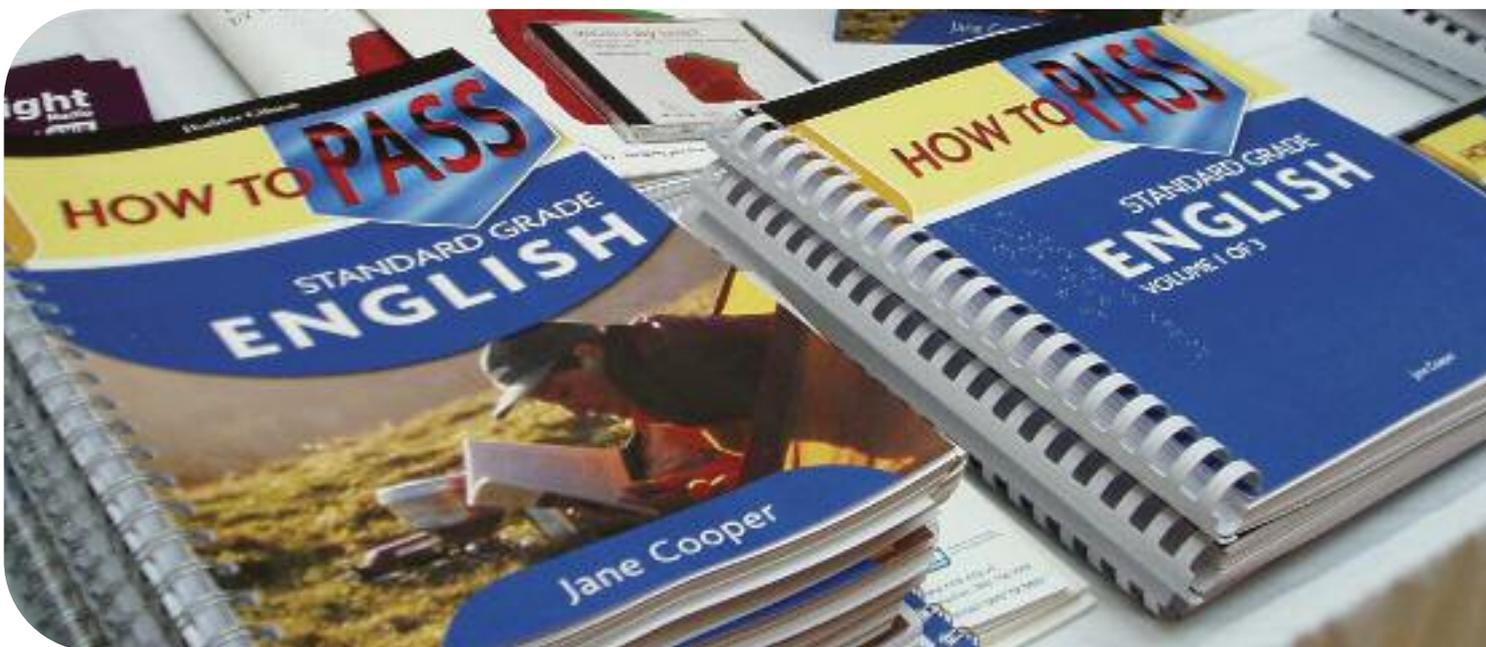
During S4 you can choose from a number of options in terms of what you want to do next. “The Scottish Government’s 16+ learning choices. Policies and practice framework; supporting all young people into positive and sustained destinations” (April 2010) set out the Scottish Government’s wish that from December 2010 onwards, all young people will continue in education after 16 years.

You may wish to remain at school until 17 or 18 or you might choose to attend a local college to study a course there. Alternatively, you might want to go straight into work and earn a living. There are lots of options but planning for your future will begin before you leave school.

Before you leave school you should have a transitions meeting with your teachers or career co-ordinator or a careers adviser. This face-to-face meeting should happen at least 12 months before leaving school.

To prepare for this meeting you should:

- meet with your careers adviser to discuss what subjects you are enjoying and achieving good grades in, which subjects you plan to take for exams and your aspirations for life after school
- talk to your subject teachers about your strengths and which subjects you are best at and enjoy most
- talk to your Skills Development Scotland (SDS) Careers Adviser and your parents about what you may want to do after completing S4. You might be considering staying on, a local college, further training or going straight into work
- think about any difficulties you are having in school so that you can talk about these at the meeting
- always ask for additional meetings if you feel you need them.



As well as careers advisers, teachers and your Qualified Teacher for the Visually Impaired, your parents or carers will also be invited to attend the meeting. If you feel shy or nervous about raising things at the meeting it is a good idea to talk through any issues with your parents, carers or a member of staff beforehand. You may also be able to have an Advocacy Worker who will help you plan before and support you during meetings.

A report will be written after the meeting which summarises everything you talked about. Your parents will be sent a copy and you can read through it to check that you are happy with it. If you think anything has been missed out, talk to a member of staff about it. This report is for you to refer to in the future.

Remember, it's your plan for your future so it's important that you feel it says what you think it should.

## What if I stay on at school?

If you stay on at school, things will pretty much remain the same. You'll continue to get support from your school and the support staff you are familiar with.



# Moving to a local college or work-based learning

If you leave school and decide to move on to Further Education college or if you are going into work-based learning, then information on your support needs will be passed onto college or the organisation providing work-based learning .

You will still get support but it will be provided by the support staff at the local college or the work-based learning provider. You won't see your Qualified Teacher for the Visually Impaired any longer and you will be taught by a new team of staff at the college or organisation.

The support that you can get at college or work-based learning provider can vary and it's really important that you go and visit and speak to people before you apply. Even if you're not sure that you definitely want to go, it's a good idea to arrange a visit because it may help you make up your mind.

## Things to help you decide if a college or work-based learning provider is right for you

- check out their website – every college and provider has one
- ask for information in the format that you need
- talk to other people who have been there and ask how they got on
- talk to your subject teachers and support staff at school and ask if they think the place is right for you
- visit the colleges and work-based learning providers you are considering as soon as possible. You'll be able to meet the support staff there and ask questions. Also, make sure you check out what assistive technology they've got – ask about how many computers have screen magnification software and what software they use. All of this will be important to you in making your decision
- talk to the lecturers/trainers who will be teaching you
- identify whether the course attracts Disabled Student Allowance (DSA) funding. (Please see the section on DSA starting on page 10).

Elsewhere in the UK there are also specialist residential colleges such as RNIB Loughborough College, Royal National College, Hereford and Queen Alexandra College, Birmingham. These options should be discussed further with your Careers Adviser.



## Modern Apprenticeships

Modern Apprenticeships can be a way of working while studying for a qualification at the same time. For more information, speak with your Careers Adviser.

## Work experience

Work experience is a crucial part of moving on and allows you to have hands on experience of what it's like to work in different environments. Work experience isn't just something you do towards the end of your time at school; it's something that you should look to do again when you are in college or university. Work experience is a great way of showing motivation and initiative on your CV and will help you decide if you would like to go into a particular area of work. Work experience may form part of a course you do at university and can sometimes even lead to the offer of a job. It's really important to see work experience as something that you do not only in school, but after you leave as well.

Your school's work experience coordinator will support you in finding potential placements for work experience. Arranging the placement will be your responsibility, but you may want to ask your parents to help you.

## Other online resources

Work experience is of increasing importance on a graduate CV. Disability Toolkits website aims to help you gain and make the most of work experience and placement opportunities, exploring some of the issues that you might face as a disabled student and providing you with information and sources of support that may benefit you. Visit [www.disabilitytoolkits.ac.uk](http://www.disabilitytoolkits.ac.uk) for more information.

## Volunteering

Volunteering can add a great deal to your life and the lives of others. It offers you the chance to become involved with something you really care about as well as an opportunity to meet new and like-minded people. It also enables you to try out something new and can be useful in terms of determining whether you'd like a career in a certain area. Skills and experience gained from volunteering are another way to show potential employers what you can offer. Volunteering with an organisation can sometimes lead to the offer of a job.

There are lots of volunteering opportunities, including many with RNIB Scotland. To find out more, please phone 0845 603 0575 or 01733 375 450 or email [volunteering@rnib.org.uk](mailto:volunteering@rnib.org.uk).

# Moving on to university

Once you have finished school or college you may be considering applying to university. This is a really exciting time and may even involve moving away from home and living alone for the first time. Again, it's really important to plan well in advance, so start thinking about this as soon as you can. It's important to think ahead to make sure that you choose the right course, the right university and most importantly to make sure that everything is in place and ready for your first day. This means you can start your course and concentrate on making friends and settling in, rather than having to worry about any issues to do with your equipment.

## Selecting a university

- discuss course options with your Careers Advisers, subject tutors, support staff and parents
- look at the UCAS website for information on courses, institutions and entry requirements: [www.ucas.ac.uk](http://www.ucas.ac.uk)
- every university has its own website. This will give you information about their courses, social activities and halls of residence. There will be specific pages which tell you about the extra support and types of assistive technology and access software available within the library. You can also ask for a prospectus to be posted to you and ask if they can provide a copy in braille or large print
- arrange a visit. There will be open days advertised on the website although you may want to contact the Disability Support Service directly as you might be able to go and meet them at the same time. This is useful as you can meet the staff in advance and ask questions about the types of support you'll be able to access.



## Disabled Students Allowance (DSA)

The DSA is a grant that can help meet the extra course costs students can face as a direct result of their sight loss and/or other disabilities. The DSA will enable you to study and have access to course materials on an equal basis to other students and is paid on top of the standard student finance package. The amount you will receive depends on the amount and types of extra support you'll need. The DSA grant does not have to be repaid and doesn't affect any benefits you may be in receipt of. It's also important to know that your entitlement to DSA is not affected by your household income – it's about what you need.

### What types of things can my DSA pay for?

- items of specialist equipment – for example, screen readers, computer magnification software, braille note takers
- non-medical helper's allowance – for example, library support or the use of a reader during examinations
- general allowance – which can cover things like enlarged examination papers and course materials.

One great thing about the Disabled Students Allowance is that the equipment it pays for belongs to you and can be kept at home or at your halls of residence. This means you'll have full access to the assistive technology you need at home and it is yours to keep.

### Other types of support that the DSA can pay for include:

- a student with sight problems to learn braille
- rehabilitation skills and mobility training
- taxi fares to and from university.

It's important that you are aware of the wide range of support that you may be able to access through your DSA payment. Think about the list outlined above before you leave and talk through what your needs have been in the past and what they may be throughout your course of study. You may need some mobility training on arrival to familiarise yourself with certain routes and the layout of the university. Try to think about all of these things when you are looking for and applying to university.

### Top tip on technology

You may not know much about the wide range of technology that's on the market and with technology advancing constantly it can be hard to keep up. It might be a good idea to contact a supplier who can come and visit you at home to show you the latest products on the market. If you see something you think might be useful at university you can discuss this with your DSA assessor later on who may be able to apply for it under the DSA payment.

## Who do I apply to for Disabled Students Allowance?

To find out more about the Disabled Students Allowance visit: [www.saas.gov.uk](http://www.saas.gov.uk)

To be eligible to apply for support from Students Awards Agency Scotland (SAAS) you must meet certain residence conditions as set out in The Students' Allowances (Scotland) Regulations 2007 (as amended) and be studying a course of higher education at HNC or equivalent level or above. SAAS have to confirm that you have been accepted onto a course that SAAS support before they can consider you for the additional allowances such as DSA.

The process can take time so it is essential that you apply for the DSA as early as possible. You can apply for the DSA usually from the end of April.

### The DSA assessment

If you decide to apply to university you will be assessed, usually by someone within the university. The assessor should have received information about the support you have received at school or college and will take into account:

- the prognosis of your sight condition
- the demands of the course over the coming years.

The assessor will talk to you and decide what types of support to apply for. It's very useful if you've already given thought to this so that you can effectively discuss your needs when being assessed. Remember, you are the best person to describe your own needs.

The assessor will then produce a report which outlines the support you are applying for. You are entitled to a copy of this and should agree on the content with your assessor. This will then be sent to your local education authority as a request for the DSA.

### What if my needs change throughout my time at university?

The DSA assessment is designed to meet your needs throughout your time at university but sometimes things change. You may experience deterioration in your sight or may come up against a particular module which causes problems and may require you to have access to a new piece of equipment. If you experience any such difficulties you are entitled to request a "top-up assessment" which will look at a particular problem and provide a solution.



## Speaking out

Many universities are really big. They can include lots of different buildings, sometimes spread out over a large area with lots of staff and different departments. It's crucial not to be overwhelmed by this. It's important that you know exactly who is responsible for providing your support, for example who within your subject department will be producing your materials in large print and organising your extra time for exams.

The most important thing to remember is to be vocal and confident about asking for help. If you are not sure who to approach just ask at reception or find a lecturer who will point you in the right direction.

At university, the responsibility is on you to make sure that you are receiving the help you need. It is your responsibility to make sure that the university is aware of your needs. For example, if you require materials in large print or braille, you must ask for them.

If you are having any problems it will be up to you to inform staff of this so that a solution can be found. There is a lot of support and staff to help you at university so be proactive and confident about asking for help.

### **Self-advocacy – a skill for life**

Having the confidence to be vocal about any problems you are having is an essential part of being independent and succeeding in life. Beyond university, when you are thinking about work and employment you'll need to be confident about talking to employers and staff about the support you need to ensure that you reach your full potential in your career. University can be a really good place to build on your skills and start proactively finding solutions to problems yourself.

## Other funding

As well as DSA, you may be able to secure funding towards any additional equipment through charitable trusts such as the Snowdon Foundation. Their decision to award you funding is not means tested but you must show that:

- you are a student
- you need additional support.

For more information about the Snowdon Foundation visit:

[www.snowdonawardscheme.org.uk](http://www.snowdonawardscheme.org.uk)

# Moving on to work: important things to know

## Skills Development Scotland (SDS)

SDS staff can assist individuals with additional support needs to:

- assess their own interests, skills and strengths
- understand the range of options open to them
- develop realistic and achievable career plans
- develop job seeking skills if appropriate
- make applications for college and university courses
- apply for current job or training vacancies
- link with other helpful organisations and agencies.

For more information and help, you can call in to your local Skills Development Scotland Careers Centre or visit their website: [www.skillsdevelopmentscotland.co.uk](http://www.skillsdevelopmentscotland.co.uk)



You may also wish to visit the “My World of Work” section on the website which offers lots of valuable information and tools to help you find a job or develop your career.

## Find your Disability Employment Adviser (DEA)

Your local Jobcentre will be able to help you look for work in your area. They advertise job opportunities online and also in the Jobcentre itself. If you need extra employment support because of your sight loss, the Jobcentre can put you in touch with one of their Disability Employment Advisers, sometimes called DEAs. They can help you find work or gain new skills even if you have been out of work for a long time, or if you have little or no work experience. It's well worth getting in touch with a DEA in your area to get some additional help with your job search.

## The two tick symbol

When you are applying for jobs, look out for employers displaying the disability symbol. It shows they have a positive attitude towards applications from people with a disability and guarantees that they will offer you an interview if you meet the minimum criteria for a job vacancy.



The disability symbol is made up of two ticks and the words “positive about disabled people”. Look out for the symbol on job adverts and application forms.

To find out more about the role of the Disability Employment Adviser or the two tick symbol visit [www.direct.gov.uk](http://www.direct.gov.uk)

## Talking to employers about your sight loss

When you are applying for jobs you need to think about if and when you plan to tell your employer about your sight problems. There aren't any rules about this and you don't have to tell an employer if you don't want to. It is up to you to decide at what point in applying for a job you choose to discuss it.

There are lots of benefits to talking to your employer about your sight loss. It means that you have the opportunity to approach the issue in a positive way and allows you to reassure the employer that your sight loss does not mean that you are unable to do the job properly.

There are many more reasons why talking to your employer about your sight problems may be a good idea. If you decide that you want to talk about your sight loss to a potential employer you can design your own disclosure strategy. This means you plan exactly how and when you want to discuss this and you should think about this before going to job interviews.

There is lots of useful information about disclosure and guidance about how to form your disclosure strategy on RNIB's website. Visit [www.rnib.org.uk](http://www.rnib.org.uk) for more information.



## The Access to Work scheme

When you are looking for work it's really important that you know about the Access to Work scheme. It's a Jobcentre Plus programme and can in some cases fund things like:

- specialist equipment you may need because of your disability
- support with transport costs where there is no viable public transport alternative
- hi-tech low vision aids to help carry out your work.

The support that you'll get will depend on the job you are doing and your needs. You'll be assessed by an Access to Work assessor who will discuss the support you are likely to need and look at the requirements of your job.

For more information about the Access to Work scheme and the support it offers visit [www.direct.gov.uk](http://www.direct.gov.uk) or contact RNIB Scotland's Employment and Learning Services Team in Glasgow, Edinburgh or Aberdeen. Useful contacts are listed at the end of this booklet.

## Interview skills: top tips

- Arrange any adjustments in advance. Ask if there are any tests involved during the interview. For example, if you have to complete a test you may need a large print version.
- Plan your journey and know what transport links you need to catch. You're unlikely to get the job if you are late.
- Make sure you know about the Access to Work scheme and what it will and won't fund.
- Dress comfortably and appropriately.
- Be confident and practise good posture.
- Research the organisation and content of the job.
- Re-read your application form.
- Research and think about who is interviewing you.
- Think about what questions you might be asked and plan your response.
- Think about if you want to disclose information relating to your sight loss.
- Prepare some questions to ask at the end of the interview.

## Putting the employer's mind at ease

It's really useful to find out as much as you can about the Access to Work scheme before your interview. Employers often worry about the potential costs of employing a person with a sight problem because they think the equipment and support needed may be expensive. Many employers don't know about the Access to Work scheme so it's a good idea to find out as much as you can about it. You'll then be able to talk about the scheme at your interview and reassure the employer that support is available and that it won't cost them lots of money.



## Ross O'Malley, Midlothian Council

"I am a Support Assistant for the Homeless Team, part of Midlothian Council's Housing Department. My duties in the office are just about everything concerned with admin: updating invoices, making appointments for clients and housing officers, updating our bed and breakfast database every week, staffing the reception desk, liaising with the housing officers, taking messages."

Ross lost his sight at the age of two due to a tumour on his optic nerve. He has no functional vision at all.

Ross left school four years ago. He enjoyed working with computers and wanted to work in an office. "I applied for lots of jobs," he says, "but I kept getting turned down. I was told it was because I had no experience. So I did a work-placement with RNIB Scotland for a year and this helped me to get the experience for the job with Midlothian Council."

Had he ever felt pessimistic about his chances of getting a job? "Oh yes, loads of times," Ross confesses. "Outwardly, I tried to be optimistic but in my head I'd think: maybe it really is never going to happen for me."

But working within the Midlothian Council team hasn't presented any major problems.

"If I'm given anything on paper, for example, I just put it through my scanner. If it's a very big document I'll ask if they can email it to me instead so my screen-reader can read it to me."

It's definitely been a positive move, he enthuses. "There's never a dull moment. I do feel really privileged to be working for my local council."

"I'd say to employers, people with sight loss can achieve things if you'll only give them the chance to prove themselves."

Ross certainly has. In 2009, he won a "Midlothian's Best" award from his local newspaper for his work on the Haggeye youth forum that set out to influence the Scottish Parliament on sight loss issues concerning young people.

Alex Marks, a senior homelessness officer with Midlothian Council, is Ross's supervisor. "There was a little bit of scepticism from some staff within the team," she recalls ("Who!" laughs Ross, feigning shock). "However, any reservations were dispelled at Ross's interview. Now, everyone feels we got the best person for the job. It didn't take Ross –

**"There's never a dull moment. I do feel really privileged to be working for my local council."**

or Gi, his guide dog – long to find their niche here.

“We did have to slightly re-organise the way we work. For instance, we moved to an electronic diary rather than a paper one. But that’s probably something we should have been moving to anyway. We check our emails a bit more frequently now to see if Ross has left us a message, though usually he’s very good about telling us. But that’s really the only changes we’ve had to make.

“It’s quite a high stress environment, but Ross copes with it very well. Certainly, we’ve noticed a change with regard to some of our clients. They’ve been a bit more respectful than they have been with other staff, and that’s been very positive for all of us.”

What about the presence of Gi, Ross’s guide dog? Alex smiles. “The others in the team do spoil Gi if Ross lets them and so do I. She’s no trouble at all.”

What is her message to employers who are unsure about employing someone with sight loss? “You can do it because the support is out there with programmes such as Access to Work. We’ve also had very good support from the Jobcentre Plus. And we’ve gained a very motivated and popular member of staff – two if you count Gi!”



**“It’s quite a high stress environment, but Ross copes with it very well.”**

# Help with low vision

Let's take moving away to university as an example. Imagine you have just finished your exams and you are about to live alone for the first time in your life. Magnifiers and other low vision aids are important in ways that you may never have thought of before. You may find magnifiers really useful for:

- reading ingredients, sell by dates and cooking instructions
- reading information on medicine bottles
- looking at the dials on the microwave, cooker and washing machine.

Living alone for the first time means you'll need to do things you perhaps relied on others for in the past. This is exciting and allows you to become more independent and confident about taking care of yourself. Low vision aids are essential for tasks like these so have an assessment before you go and talk through your lifestyle changes with your optometrist. Low vision aids may also be useful for accessing course materials at university. Let's say, for example, that your lecture notes haven't been enlarged in time, do you:

1. sit through the lecture unable to follow it and catch up later that evening or
2. use a magnifier to read the lecture notes alongside everyone else and spend the evening with your friends?



# Further help

## Benefits and financial help

As you move through your journey from school and beyond you'll be entitled to different benefits and financial assistance because of your sight loss. The financial help you'll be able to get will depend on what you are doing and your circumstances at the time: for example, at university you'll have access to the Disabled Students Allowance and at work you'll be entitled to funding through the Access to Work scheme. You may also be entitled to benefits such as Disability Living Allowance or Employment Support Allowance.

To find out about the benefits and financial help you may be entitled to, contact RNIB Scotland's Benefit Helpline on 0845 602 4033.

## Useful contacts for more information and support

**Skills Development Scotland (SDS)** offers careers advice, guidance and information to pupils in school, and to people of all ages in Scotland. SDS can offer free and impartial advice on education, training, careers, jobs and benefits. All pupils have access to a careers adviser in school and can visit their local SDS Careers Centre after leaving school.

Telephone 0845 8502 502

**Blind in Business** is a charity working with blind and partially sighted young people whose aim is to help maximise educational and employment opportunities. It offers specialist workshops and training programmes and specific services to older pupils and graduates.

Telephone 020 7588 1885

[www.blindinbusiness.org.uk](http://www.blindinbusiness.org.uk)

**RNIB's website** offers useful information for young people who are studying or looking for work. Use the website to get help with writing a CV, deciding how you'll approach discussing your sight loss with potential employers and to find out more about things like the Access to Work scheme.

[www.rnib.org.uk](http://www.rnib.org.uk)

[www.rnib.org.uk/student](http://www.rnib.org.uk/student)

[www.rnib.org.uk/scotland](http://www.rnib.org.uk/scotland)

**RNIB Helpline** is your direct line to the support, advice and products you need. We'll help you to find out what's available in your area and beyond, both from RNIB and other organisations. Whether you want to know more about an eye condition, buy a product from our shop, join our library, find out about possible benefit entitlements, be put in touch with a trained counsellor, or make a general enquiry, we're only a call away.

Telephone 0303 123 9999

Email [helpline@rnib.org.uk](mailto:helpline@rnib.org.uk)

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