Towards an accessible Europe:
Manifesto for the 2014 European election

An estimated 188,000 people have significant sight loss in Scotland. By 2031 this is set to double.
Introduction

On 22 May 2014 the polling stations open for the 2014 European elections. In the second biggest democratic exercise in the world, 400 million people can cast their vote for a new European Parliament. The Royal National Institute of Blind People (RNIB) Scotland urges Scottish voters to take part in the poll. The European elections matter.

The increase in the European Parliament’s powers since 2009 has started to make itself felt. Scotland’s six Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) will shape European legislation over the next five years in areas from the single market to civil liberties.

The Parliament – the only directly elected European Union (EU) institution – is now a linchpin of the European decision-making system and has an equal say with national governments on virtually all EU laws.

This gives MEPs an important role to play on the big issues of our times and opportunities to make life better for blind and partially sighted people.

At present, around 36,000 people are formally registered as blind and partially sighted in Scotland, with up to 188,000 living with significant sight loss. However, the number of Scots with sight loss could double to almost 400,000 between now and 2031 due to our ageing population and the persistently poor health that continues to disadvantage many of our communities.

RNIB Scotland seeks to move forward on issues that blind and partially sighted people tell us matter most to them:

- Stopping people losing their sight unnecessarily.
- Supporting independent living.
- Creating an inclusive society.

RNIB Scotland welcomes this opportunity to produce a manifesto for the 2014 European elections.

We hope that the proposals highlighted will point to those areas where the EU can have the most positive impact on improving the lives of blind and partially sighted people.
1. Employability

Use of reserved contracts

There are an estimated 8,500 people of working age in Scotland who are blind or partially sighted. But people with sight loss are amongst the most disadvantaged groups in society when it comes to employment.

While the employment rate of disabled people in general continues to increase, the position of blind and partially sighted people has remained almost static (29 per cent of blind and partially sighted people in employment compared to 76 per cent in the general population).

Even in good times the unemployment rate is more than two-thirds. In times of economic downturn, blind and partially sighted people face an even more disproportionate disadvantage.

For almost a decade RNIB Scotland has campaigned to ask Scottish politicians at all levels to actively support blind and partially sighted people, and others with disabilities, by applying Article 19 of the Directive 2004/18/EC on public procurement.

Article 19 allows reserved contracts where “most”, at least 50 per cent, of the employees are disabled or disadvantaged workers.

RNIB Scotland regrets the low uptake of reserved contracts across the UK. A total of 570 reserved contracts have been issued since 2006, 374 in 2006 and 140 in 2007. Use of reserved contracts has since declined sharply to a total of 56 for 2008-12 with only seven reserved contracts issued in 2012.

The EU has now completed a major reform of its procurement laws which will lead to a weakening of the existing provision. It will increase competition for reserved contracts as companies where at least 30 per cent of the employees are disabled or disadvantaged workers will be able to tender. Previously companies could only compete for reserved contracts if a majority of their workers was disabled or disadvantaged.

This makes it all the more important to maximise use of reserved contracts. A vibrant and innovative supported business sector can play a key role in generating employment opportunities for blind and partially sighted workers.

Asks:

• Scottish MEPs to monitor the use of the new public procurement rules in relation to reserved contracts and to encourage the EU to introduce further measures to give support to jobseekers with sight loss.

• It is current Scottish Government policy that every public body and local authority should have at least one contract issued through Article 19. We would urge Scottish politicians to maximise use of reserved contracts and help support disabled and blind and partially sighted people.
2. Mobility by bus and air

Bus

People who are blind or partially sighted rely heavily on public transport. Bus and coach travel is an affordable means of transport; unfortunately, people with sight loss regularly experience discrimination in accessing this mode of transport because drivers have little or no awareness of the specific needs of disabled passengers. Much of this discrimination could be addressed through good quality disability awareness training for bus and coach drivers.

EU Regulation 181/2011 on the rights of passengers in bus and coach travel came into force in March 2013. However, the UK Government decided to postpone the implementation of mandatory disability awareness training for all drivers, a key part of the legislation, for a further five years, arguing that current training provision is sufficient.

Yet RNIB’s Bus campaign report, “Stop for Me, Speak to Me”, found that:

- 9 in 10 people with sight loss cannot see an approaching bus in time to hail it.
- 8 in 10 people with sight loss say they missed the bus they want.
- 7 in 10 missed the bus because it boarded away from the official bus stop.

RNIB Scotland therefore welcomes the European Commission’s consultation on Directive 2003/59/EC on the initial qualification and periodic training of drivers. The consultation closed in October 2013 and legislation will follow in the next parliament.

Asks:

- RNIB Scotland calls on the UK Government to implement the mandatory disability awareness training provision set out in EU Regulation 181/2011 on the rights of passengers in bus and coach travel without further delay.
- RNIB Scotland also believes that a review of the Directive is needed and asks the Scottish MEPs to ensure that it includes mandatory disability awareness training of drivers.
- Calls on Scottish politicians to support RNIB Scotland’s Stop for me, speak to me bus campaign. Catching a bus should not be a sight test.
Air

Laws on the rights of disabled persons and persons with reduced mobility when travelling by air came into force in 2008.

EU Regulation 1107/2006 aims to protect disabled persons and those with reduced mobility travelling by air against discrimination and to ensure that they receive the assistance they need.

In 2010-2011 the European Blind Union (EBU) reviewed how the legislation was working. The most common problems encountered included:
- waiting for assistance for too long.
- having a wheelchair imposed.
- being isolated from other passengers
- rude or inadequate behaviour of staff.
- access to information (language barrier, poor signage or poorly audible announcements).
- luggage handling.
- cost of assistance.
- denial of boarding to a guide.

Asks:

RNIB Scotland supports the EBU recommendations to ensure:
- that visually impaired air passengers have a clear understanding of their rights.
- more effective implementation of the Regulation.
- provision of disability awareness training.
- provision of accessible information.

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Accessibility

A rights issue

Accessibility of goods and services is a rights issue.

The EU ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), which came into force on 22 January 2011. Article 9 on Accessibility underlines the need:

“To enable persons with disabilities to live independently and participate fully in all aspects of life, States Parties shall take appropriate measures to ensure to persons with disabilities access, on an equal basis with others, to the physical environment, to transportation, to information and communications, including information and communications technologies and systems, and to other facilities and services open or provided to the public, both in urban and in rural areas. These measures... shall include the identification and elimination of obstacles and barriers to accessibility.”

Upcoming EU legislation on accessibility could make significant improvements to the life experiences of blind and partially sighted people:

- The Directive on the Accessibility of Public Sector Bodies’ Websites.
- The European Accessibility Act.

Most people take access to information and online services for granted and more and more information and services are delivered online. Yet less than 10 per cent of public and commercial websites are accessible. The Directive on the Accessibility of Public Sector Bodies’ Websites could be the first significant step towards the end of inaccessible websites.

Unfortunately, it now looks like this important piece of legislation will be unnecessarily delayed because Member States have yet to start discussions on the text. This will delay new rules for many months.

In addition, the European Accessibility Act, promised by the Commission in 2011, has yet to be published.

This Act was set to address the accessibility of the built environment, transport and information communication technology (ICT), potentially affecting a wide range of products – for example, everything from pavements, to audible and visual announcements on buses, to computers, phones and household goods such as washing machines, microwave and standard ovens and fridges.

RNIB Scotland believes that such legislation is urgently needed to ensure the accessibility of goods and services.
Many manufacturers and service providers continue to perceive disabled people as a non-profitable “niche” market, but there is substantial evidence to support the argument that statutory requirements for inclusion deliver access solutions of wider benefit and that a regulatory framework will drive innovation for inclusion.

In the United States, for example, strong legislation in the education market and public procurement have driven Apple to include voice access in their mobile phone and internet access products. Moreover, many products designed with accessibility considerations in mind go on to have widespread appeal such as the British Telecom “Big Button” telephone, which became one of their best sellers.

Asks:

- RNIB Scotland calls for immediate action to progress the Directive on the Accessibility of Public Sector Bodies’ Websites in Council.
- We also call for the European Commission to publish the European Accessibility Act. Blind and partially sighted people have been shut out for far too long – it is time for the EU to act!