

# **Employment status and sight loss**

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## 1. Key messages

- Blind and partially sighted people are significantly less likely to be in paid employment than the general population or other disabled people.
- Only one in four registered blind or partially sighted people of working age is in employment.
- This figure is even worse for people who are completely blind. Only around one in 10 people with poor functional vision is in paid employment.
- There has been a significant decrease in the proportion of registered blind and partially sighted people of working age in any form of employment over the last decade from one in three in 2005 to around one in four in 2015.
- 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.
- Working age people with no qualifications are more than six times as likely to be in employment than registered blind and partially sighted people with no qualifications.
- Since 2011, the Labour Force Survey has shown a reduction in employment rates for blind and partially sighted people, and an increase in the number who are classed as unemployed.
- 30 per cent of registered blind and partially sighted people who were not in work but who had worked in the past said that they could have continued in their job given the right support.
- The disability employment gap (see page 11) for registered blind and partially sighted people is around double that for people with other disabilities, and this gap is widening.

## 2. Introduction

There are approximately 84,500 registered blind and partially sighted people of working age in the UK [18].

In 2015, RNIB published My Voice - the results of a survey that recorded the views and experiences of over 1,200 registered blind and partially sighted people across the UK. Of those, 703 were of working age, who responded to specific questions around their employment status and their experiences relating to the world of work.

My Voice has helped us better understand the employment situation for registered blind and partially sighted people of working age living in the UK today.

This report attempts to bring together a more detailed analysis of the findings from the My Voice survey, with what we already know from the Labour Force Survey (published quarterly by the Office of National Statistics), DWP administrative data, and Network 1000 - research carried out by the University of Birmingham in 2005 - 2007.

This report looks at correlations between employment status and a wide range of factors such as age, gender, ethnicity, overall health, education qualifications etc. It also examines the support people receive to stay in work, the status of those looking for work, and the trend in blind and partially sighted people's employment status over recent years.

We now know the following:

- Blind and partially sighted people are significantly less likely to be in paid employment than the general population or other disabled people [4]. Only around a quarter of registered blind and partially sighted people of working age are in paid or self-employment, compared with around three quarters of the UK general population. There has been a significant decrease in the proportion of registered blind and partially sighted people of working age in any form of employment over the last decade from one in three in 2005 to around one in four in 2015 [9].
- There is a connection between paid employment and functional vision. Our My Voice survey indicates that only around one in

10 people with poor functional vision are in paid employment: that is, no light perception or not being able to see the shapes of furniture in a room. This compares to 44 per cent of people who could see well enough to recognise a friend across the road in paid work.

- The impact of additional impairments on employment status is even more evident. We asked participants in the My Voice survey whether they had any other impairments that caused difficulties in any other areas of life, for example, with mobility, hearing or mental health. In total, 38 per cent of people who reported no other impairments, that is, sight loss only, were in employment. This compared to 22 per cent who reported one additional impairment, 15 per cent who reported two additional impairments and seven per cent of people who reported three or more additional impairments.
- Over three-quarters of registered blind and partially sighted people in work received some type of support to help them do their job. Over half had received support from the government's Access to Work scheme [1]. Network 1000 suggests that people who used to be employed but were no longer in work were less likely to have received any support from their employer when compared to people still in employment [3].

## **2.1 Aim and objectives**

We know that only around one in four registered blind and partially sighted people of working age are in employment [1]. The aim of this report is to provide a more detailed analysis of blind and partially sighted people of working age in relation to their employment status and aspirations.

In order to achieve this, we have asked five questions:

- What are the main factors that influence the employment of blind and partially sighted people?
- What support are blind and partially sighted people being provided in employment?
- What are the circumstances of blind and partially sighted people of working age not currently in employment?
- What are the trends in the employment of blind and partially sighted people?

## **3. Methodology**

### **3.1 Main evidence sources**

We have conducted a secondary analysis of existing research findings and the government's own administrative data. A short overview of each of these sources is provided in this section.

#### **My Voice**

My Voice was a survey of over 1,200 registered blind and partially sighted people. The research was conducted in 2015, and contained questions on a wide range of topic areas including employment. Participants were from all four UK countries.

My Voice uses a weighting scheme that takes into account the age distribution of all registered blind and partially sighted people. This allows us to generalise the findings from the survey to the wider UK population of registered blind and partially sighted people.

#### **Network 1000**

Network 1000 was a survey of nearly 1,000 registered blind and partially sighted people. The first wave of interviews was conducted in 2005, and this covered a wide range of topic areas including employment. A second wave of interviews was conducted in 2007 on three specific topic areas, one of which was employment. Participants were from Great Britain.

Similar to My Voice, a weighting scheme was used to help with the generalisation of the findings to the wider population of registered blind and partially sighted people.

#### **Labour Force Survey**

The Labour Force Survey is ongoing research into the employment circumstances of the UK population [5]. The survey uses an age-standardised weighting scheme. In other words, each group of participants has been given a weighting to reflect the general population. This helps when comparing results from the different groups of participants.

Through questions asked in the survey, we can identify participants with some form of sight loss. As the number of participants with sight loss is small, we aggregate survey findings from 12 quarters. In the latest analysis, from October 2012 to

September 2015, we are able to identify people described as "long term disabled with a seeing difficulty", all other long term disabled people, and people in the general population [2].

The Labour Force Survey highlights the experiences of a wider group of people with sight loss, than those who are registered blind or partially sighted. These people are defined as being "long term disabled with a seeing difficulty". The group includes people whose sight loss is not severe enough for them to be registered but which still has a significant impact on their daily life. This has formed the basis of a number of secondary analyses carried out by the University of Birmingham and others since 2008, which have been published by RNIB. These reports compare the circumstances of people with sight loss to other disabled people and people who are not disabled.

### **Administrative data**

#### **ESA and WCA**

Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) offers financial support for long-term sick or disabled people, who are not working. In order to determine eligibility for ESA, a person must undergo a Work Capability Assessment (WCA), with three different outcomes depending on the result of the assessment. Administrative data is collected by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP).

DWP administrative data has a category 'Diseases of the Eye and Adnexa'. As this includes some acute medical conditions that do not cause vision impairment, ESA claimants with these acute conditions are excluded from this analysis [6].

#### **Access to Work**

Access to Work (ATW) funds support for disabled workers in order to enable them to continue in or start work. A range of different types of support is eligible for funding including adaptations to work premises, specialist equipment, work related travel costs, and the provision of support workers. It is administered by the DWP throughout Great Britain, and records are published quarterly [7].

## **3.2 Analysis**

Whilst we had to rely on existing reports for Network 1000 [3] and the Labour Force Survey [2], we had access to the full My Voice

[1] survey dataset. This gave us an opportunity to conduct additional statistical analysis.

To provide a deeper understanding of the employment status of blind and partially sighted people, it is necessary to go beyond descriptive statistics, and analyse the relationship between employment status and potential correlates while controlling for their effects simultaneously. By using multivariate analysis we can measure which independent factors have an impact on the likelihood of being in paid employment, whilst controlling for the likely effects of other factors. The technique we used for this approach was logistic regression. This allowed us to determine which variables increased or decreased the probability of being in employment for the My Voice survey participants over and above the effects of other variables in the model.

Factors controlled for in the logistic regressions were: age, gender, ethnicity, number of additional disabilities, self-reported health, highest level of qualification, amount of functional vision, age of onset of sight loss and registration status.

### **3.3 Definitions and notes**

#### **Defining sight loss**

Both My Voice [1] and Network 1000 [3] highlight findings from a representative sample of registered blind and partially sighted people. These participants have been issued with a Certificate of Vision Impairment by a consultant ophthalmologist prior to being registered blind or partially sighted by their local council. A Certificate of Vision Impairment (CVI) is usually completed by a consultant ophthalmologist, who determines eligibility for certification depending on visual acuity, visual fields and other factors [8]. This completed certificate is then forwarded to the relevant social services department, who should then offer registration to each individual. Local authorities are required to maintain a register of blind and partially sighted people [9].

In contrast, Labour Force Survey findings are based on identifying a sample of people who self-reported their sight loss in response to survey questions. These were:

- “Do you have any physical or mental health conditions or illnesses lasting or expecting to last 12 months or more?”

- Those who responded “yes” were asked what type of health problems they had. They were able to choose from a list of 17 categories, one of which was “difficulty in seeing (while wearing spectacles or contact lenses).”
- Those who responded “yes” were asked if their condition reduced their ability to carry out day-to-day activities. If they answered “yes, a lot” or “yes, a little” they were defined as Equality Act Disabled.

We borrow the term “long-term disabled with a seeing difficulty” when talking about these participants from the Labour Force Survey [2].

### **Employment**

In the sources used in this report, employment includes:

- paid and self-employment
- full and part-time employment
- temporary and permanent employment.

### **Working age**

The definition of working age used in the My Voice report is male participants aged 18–64 and female participants aged 18–62 years. In Network 1000, working age was taken to mean males aged 18–64 and females 18–59 years. Both My Voice and Network 1000 used a definition of working age in line with the state pension age at the time the respective studies were published. By contrast, secondary analysis of the Labour Force Survey uses a definition of working age as everyone aged 16–64 years.

### **Comparing data sources**

This report draws upon My Voice survey data [1], and research findings from the Labour Force Survey [2] and Network 1000 [3]. Some caution needs to be exercised when interpreting these findings, as all three sources of data have different definitions of “working age”, use different weighting schemes and relate to different time periods.

## 4. Blind and partially sighted people in employment

### Overview

People with sight loss are less likely to be in work when compared to the overall UK population. This is supported by evidence from the My Voice and Network 1000 surveys with blind and partially sighted people [1, 3], as well as the Labour Force Survey of the general population designed to monitor trends in the UK labour market [2, 4].

### Employment status

In 2015, according to My Voice, the employment status of registered blind and partially sighted people was [1]:

- Employed – 26 per cent
  - (of whom 22 per cent are in paid employment and 4 per cent are self-employed)
- Unemployed – 22 per cent
- Long-term sick or disabled – 25 per cent
- Retired – 16 per cent
- Student – 3 per cent
- Looking after family or home – 4 per cent
- "Something else" – 4 per cent.

### Comparisons of the proportion of people in employment

People with sight loss are much less likely to be in employment than the UK population as a whole. Overall, 74 per cent of the UK population is in work. This compares with 45 per cent of people who are long term disabled with a seeing difficulty, and 26 per cent of those who are registered blind or partially sighted [1, 2].

The proportion of people in work:

- 26 per cent - Registered blind and partially sighted people
- 45 per cent - Long term disabled with a seeing difficulty
- 48 per cent - Other long term disabled
- 79 per cent - Not disabled

- 74 per cent - All people of working age

The disability employment gap (that is, the difference between the 48 per cent of disabled people in work and the 74 per cent of all people of working age in work) is therefore around 24 per cent, whereas for registered blind and partially sighted people, the figure is around 48 per cent.

## 4.1 Age

Age plays an important role in determining overall employment status, and consequently the likelihood of being in employment. This is true in the overall population, and also for blind and partially sighted people. For example, people aged 18–29 years are much more likely to report their employment status as being a student compared to people aged 50–64 years. Alternatively, people aged 50 and over are much more likely to say that they are retired.

For ages 18–25 years, 22 per cent of registered blind and partially sighted people were in employment. This compares to 26 per cent of people who were long-term disabled with a seeing difficulty, and 54 per cent of all people aged 16–25 years.

For ages 26–44 years, 35 per cent of registered blind and partially sighted people were in employment. This compares to 48 per cent of people who were long-term disabled with a seeing difficulty, and 81 per cent of all people in this age group.

For ages 45–54 years, 27 per cent of registered blind and partially sighted people were in employment. This compares to 56 per cent of people who were long-term disabled with a seeing difficulty, and 86 per cent of all people in this age group.

For ages 55–64 years, 17 per cent of registered blind and partially sighted people were in employment. This compares to 46 per cent of people who were long-term disabled with a seeing difficulty, and 70 per cent of all people in this age group.

After controlling for other factors in the My Voice survey data [1], age was a significant factor in determining employment status. People aged 30–49 years were more likely to be in employment when compared to people aged 50–64 years.

## **4.2 Gender**

After controlling for other factors in the My Voice survey data [1], gender did not appear to be significantly linked to employment status.

## **4.3 Ethnicity**

After controlling for other factors in the My Voice survey data [1], ethnicity did not appear to be significantly linked to employment status.

## **4.4 Registration status**

After controlling for other factors in the My Voice survey data [1], whether someone was registered blind or registered partially sighted did not appear to be significantly linked to employment status.

## **4.5 Functional vision**

Self-reported functional vision also impacts on the likelihood of being in paid employment. Registered blind or partially sighted people with poorer functional vision were much less likely to be in paid employment when compared to those with better functional vision. The less functional vision someone has, the less likely they are to be in paid employment.

Only around one in 10 people with poor functional vision are in paid employment, that is, no light perception or not being able to see the shapes of furniture in a room. This compares to 39 per cent of people who could see well enough to recognise a friend across the road in paid work.

After controlling for other factors, amongst the My Voice participants there is a statistically significant relationship between amount of functional vision and likelihood of being in employment. People who cannot see well enough to recognise a friend who is at arm's length away or with poorer functional vision are less likely to be in paid employment compared to those who are able to see well enough to recognise a friend across the road.

## **4.6 Additional disabilities**

In the My Voice survey, participants were asked whether they had any other impairments that caused difficulties in any other areas of life, for example, with mobility, hearing or mental health. Overall, 65 per cent of working age participants reported at least one additional impairment.

In terms of employment, 43 per cent of people who reported no other impairments, that is, sight loss only, were in employment. This compared to 26 per cent who reported one additional impairment, 14 per cent who reported two additional impairments and eight per cent of people who reported three or more additional impairments.

After controlling for other factors, amongst the My Voice participants there is a statistically significant relationship between the number of additional impairments and likelihood of being in employment. The greater the number of other impairments someone has in addition to their sight loss, the less likely they are to be in employment.

## **4.7 Overall health**

The My Voice survey also asked participants to assess their overall health. Nearly half of people who described their health as “very good” were in employment, compared with less than one per cent who described their health as “very bad”.

After controlling for other factors in the My Voice survey data [1], overall health was a significant factor in determining employment status. People who described their overall health as good or very good were more likely to be in employment compared to those with bad or very bad health.

## **4.8 Educational attainment**

According to both My Voice and the Labour Force Survey, the higher the qualifications held by a participant the more likely they were to be in employment. By comparing the two surveys, we can say that registered blind and partially sighted people need a degree to have a similar chance of being in employment as someone with no qualifications in the general population.

In the overall UK population, working age people with no qualifications are more than six times as likely to be in employment than registered blind and partially sighted people with no qualifications.

**In employment - degree or above:**

- 43 per cent – registered blind and partially sighted people
- 64 per cent - long term disabled with a seeing difficulty
- 71 per cent - other long term disabled
- 88 per cent - all people of working age without a disability
- 84 per cent - all people of working age

**In employment - no qualification:**

- 6 per cent - registered blind and partially sighted people
- 13.5 per cent - long term disabled with a seeing difficulty
- 18 per cent - other long term disabled
- 58 per cent - all people of working age without a disability
- 40 per cent - all people of working age

After controlling for other factors, we are able to say that amongst the My Voice participants there is a statistically significant relationship between the highest level of qualification reported and likelihood of being in employment. The higher the level of qualification, the greater the probability of being in employment compared to people with no qualifications.

## **4.9 Time of sight loss**

After controlling for other factors in the My Voice survey data [1], time of sight loss (that is, the point in a person's life that they lost their sight - including since birth) did not appear to be significantly linked to employment status.

## 4.10 Summary

RNIB's My Voice survey, published in 2015, gives us the following insights about registered blind and partially sighted people:

- In 2015, the employment status of registered blind and partially sighted people was around 26 per cent

After conducting logistic regression analysis, controlling for the effects of age, gender, ethnicity, number of additional disabilities, self-reported health, educational qualification, age of onset of sight loss and registration status, we are able to say:

- Age can play a significant role in determining employment status, and consequently the likelihood of being in employment. People aged 30–49 years were more likely to be in employment when compared to people aged 50–64 years.
- Gender, ethnicity, and registration status does not appear to be significantly linked to employment status.
- There is a statistically significant relationship between amount of functional vision and likelihood of being in employment. People who cannot see well enough to recognise a friend who is at arm's length away or with poorer functional vision are less likely to be in paid employment compared to those who are able to see well enough to recognise a friend across the road.
- There is a statistically significant relationship between the number of additional impairments and likelihood of being in employment. The greater the number of other impairments someone has in addition to their sight loss, the less likely they are to be in employment.
- There is a statistically significant relationship between subjective reporting of overall health and employment status. People who described their overall health as good or very good were more likely to be in employment compared to those with bad or very bad health.
- There is a statistically significant relationship between the highest level of qualification reported and likelihood of being in employment. The higher the level of qualification, the greater the probability of being in employment compared to people with no qualifications.

- The time of sight loss (that is, the point in a person's life that they lost their sight - including since birth) does not appear to be significantly linked to employment status.

By comparing the data from RNIB's My Voice survey (2015), with RNIB's analysis of Labour Force Survey data (2012 - 2015), we know that the disability employment gap for blind and partially sighted people is around 48 per cent, compared to around 24 per cent for all other disabled people.

## **5. Support in work**

### **5.1 General support**

Blind and partially sighted people receive a range of different types of support in the workplace which helps them carry out their job. Some adjustments made involve direct costs such as the provision of special aids or equipment. (This can often be eligible for Access to Work funding.) Employers can also provide support which does not have direct associated costs, such as offering flexible working hours [1].

My Voice participants who were in employment (n=190) were asked what, if any, additional support their employment had provided, either with or without support from the government's Access to Work scheme.

Over three-quarters of people said that they received some type of support. In total, 48 per cent had been provided with special aids or equipment, 32 per cent said their employers had identified adaptations to the working environment, 29 per cent had been allowed time off work and 33 per cent had been given flexibility in working hours. However, 23 per cent of people in employment said that their employer had made no adjustments [1].

The Network 1000 employment survey was able to make an additional comparison over time, not yet possible in the My Voice research. Support in work was compared for participants of working age who were in employment and those who were previously in employment but were now not in work.

Of the Network 1000 participants who were in employment, only 11 per cent had not received any support. However, of the people no longer in work, 38 per cent had not received any support. The largest proportional differences between the two groups were support from other staff (43 per cent of those not in work had been supported, compared to 65 per cent of those in work) and special aids or equipment to do the job (38 per cent of those not in work had been supported, compared to 59 per cent of those in work). Of those no longer in work, approximately 30 per cent replied that they believe they could have been able to continue in their job if they had been given more support [3].

## **5.2 Support from Access to Work**

One source of funded support for blind and partially sighted people in the workplace is provided through the government's Access to Work (ATW) scheme, although some associated support costs can also be provided by employers. Employers can also provide support which does not have direct associated costs, such as offering flexible working hours [1].

Amongst My Voice participants, more than half (51 per cent) of registered blind and partially sighted people who were in employment had received support under ATW [1]. The funds can pay for practical support to help people with a disability, health or mental health condition start working, stay in work, move into self-employment or start a business [7].

According to DWP's administrative data, in the period from April 2015 to March 2016:

- 5,270 visually impaired people were helped by Access to Work
- 870 visually impaired people were new to the scheme [10]

Around 14 per cent of the entire ATW spend goes to supporting visually impaired individuals with an average spend per person per year of £4,500 on visually impaired individuals [10, 11].

## **6. People not in employment**

People who are not in employment can be defined as being in one of two groups: unemployed or economically inactive.

To be classed as unemployed, they must be not in employment and must have been actively seeking work in the previous four weeks. These people are economically active but unemployed. This aligns with the International Labour Organisation (ILO) definition of unemployment [12].

If not actively seeking work, people not in employment are defined as economically inactive and not classed as being in the labour market. This includes people who may be long term sick or disabled, retired, looking after the family or home or in education (students) [12].

## **6.1 Unemployment**

Overall, 22 per cent of My Voice participants who were registered blind or partially sighted said that they were unemployed [1]. However, this is self-reported unemployment, and many participants who reported unemployment cannot be described as ILO unemployed as they may have not sought work in the previous four weeks.

As a result, the rate of self-reported unemployment in My Voice cannot be compared to the rate of ILO unemployment in the Labour Force Survey. However, we can compare the rate of unemployment for people long term disabled with a seeing difficulty to the general population in the Labour Force Survey.

Findings from Labour Force Survey analysis suggest that eight per cent of people who are long term disabled with a seeing difficulty were unemployed. Amongst the rest of the long term disabled population, this proportion is seven per cent and amongst the general population, the proportion of people defined as unemployed was 5.4 per cent [2].

## **6.2 Economically inactive**

Overall, just over half (52 per cent) of people who are registered blind or partially sighted and of working age were economically inactive. This includes people who are long term sick or disabled, retired, looking after the family or home, in education or 'doing

something else' (economically inactive but not categorised as being in any of the preceding groups) [1].

Due to the self-reported nature of responses, the number of registered blind and partially sighted people who are economically inactive according to ILO definitions is much higher than 52 per cent. Only around one-quarter (26 per cent) of My Voice participants who said they were unemployed also said that they were actively seeking work.

For this reason, analysis from the Labour Force Survey of those considered economically inactive cannot be directly compared with the My Voice findings. However, we can compare the rate of economic activity for people long term disabled with a seeing difficulty to the general population in the Labour Force Survey.

Of people long term disabled with a seeing difficulty, 44 per cent were economically inactive. This is comparable with the rest of the population with a long term disability. However, in the general working age population, just 20 per cent of people were economically inactive [2].

### **6.3 ESA, WCA, and work-related activity**

Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) offers financial support for long-term sick or disabled people, who are not working. Claimants must participate in a Work Capability Assessment (WCA) to check eligibility, and are placed in the Work Related Activity Group which offers support in preparing for work, or the Support Group for those unable to work. Those found not eligible to claim ESA are found fit for work.

People allocated to the Support Group are classed as long term sick or disabled, therefore economically inactive. People found fit for work are economically active but unemployed and they are eligible to claim Job Seeker's Allowance if not in work. People allocated to the Work Related Activity Group are technically still economically active, but do not come under the ILO definition for unemployment [6]. The 'diseases of the eye and adnexa' category was used to identify claimants with a vision impairment, but excluding those with acute eye conditions that do not cause vision impairment [13].

An analysis of WCA outcomes for claimants with a vision impairment found that 12,600 had completed their assessment (including outcomes from appeals) from October 2008 to September 2014. Claimants were placed in one of the three groups with 30 per cent placed in the Support Group, 35 per cent placed in the Work Related Activity Group and 35 per cent found fit for work [13].

Outcomes for people with a vision impairment have not been as positive as outcomes across all applicants in the Work Related Activity Group. Of those assigned to the Work Programme, only 8 per cent of applicants with an eye condition associated with visual impairment qualified for a job outcome payment. This is considerably lower than the 26 per cent average across all participants (June 2011 to April 2015) [14].

Of the 1,140 blind or partially sighted people enrolled onto the Work Programme between June 2011 and March 2015, it helped just 90 (approximately 8 per cent) into paid employment [14].

The My Voice research found that 35 per cent of working age participants had been involved in a WCA. Of this group of people, 67 per cent were allocated to the Support Group. There was a link between likelihood of being found not fit for work and the number of additional impairments. Half of people with no additional impairments who had a WCA were allocated to the Support Group, compared to four out of five people with two or more additional impairments [1].

Of the other My Voice participants who had received a WCA, 22 per cent were allocated to the Work Related Activity Group and 11 per cent were found fit for work. Overall, 23 per cent appealed their WCA decision, with four out of five people in this group being satisfied with the result of this appeal [1].

## **7. Trends in employment status**

### **7.1 Trends in employment rates**

The proportion of registered blind and partially sighted people in employment has been worsening in recent years.

My Voice found the 2015 rate of employment among registered blind and partially sighted people of working age to be 26 per cent [1]. In the 2005 Network 1000 study, the rate was 33 per cent [3]. This represents a statistically significant decrease in the employment rate for blind and partially sighted people over the last decade.

A similar trend can be seen among people with a seeing difficulty, recorded in the Labour Force Survey. Analysis was carried out on three years' worth of data to increase the sample size. In 2012 to 2015, the rate of employment was 45 per cent [3]. This is lower than the rate of 48 per cent found in analysis for the period 2004 to 2007 [15]. However, these results need to be treated with caution as the decrease is within statistical margins of error and is therefore not statistically significant given low numbers involved.

Amongst the general working age population, the Labour Force Survey shows that the rate of employment has been relatively static in the same period [2, 15]. This is visible in Office for National Statistics (ONS) analysis where the employment rate was 73 per cent both in 2005 and 2015, comparative years to Network 1000 and My Voice. This snapshot does not show the visible dip in employment rates during the economic crisis observed in the Labour Force Survey figures, however it does show that employment rates were recovered to 'pre-crisis' levels by 2015 [16].

These findings suggest that people who are registered blind or partially sighted may have been more adversely affected by changes to the labour market in recent years than the general population.

## **7.2 Trends in circumstances for blind and partially sighted people not in employment**

There has been little change in the circumstances of blind and partially sighted people who are not in employment.

The proportion of blind and partially sighted people of working age who describe themselves as unemployed has remained unchanged over the past ten years. The 2015 My Voice research and 2005 Network 1000 research found the self-reported

proportion of people in unemployment to be 22 per cent and 20 per cent respectively.

The proportion of people who describe themselves as being part of an economically inactive group changed slightly from 48 per cent in 2005 to 52 per cent in 2015 [1, 3].

### **7.3 Comparative trends taken from Labour Force Survey analysis of people not in employment**

Labour Force Survey trend data can be compared to show the situation for people in the general population and people long term disabled with a seeing difficulty.

For those with a seeing difficulty, the levels of economic inactivity have remained fairly constant. The rate was 44 per cent in 2012 to 2015 and 45 per cent in 2004 to 2007 [2, 15]. The proportion of people in unemployment has shown little change in the same period, from 7 per cent in 2004 to 2007 to 8 per cent in 2012 to 2015.

Amongst all other people who are long term disabled, economic inactivity has remained relatively constant. The rate was 44 per cent in 2012 to 2015 and 46 per cent in 2004 to 2007 [2, 15]. The proportion of people in unemployment has shown an increase in the same period, from 4 per cent in 2004 to 2007 to 7 per cent in 2012 to 2015.

In the general population, economic inactivity has also remained relatively constant. The rate was 20 per cent in 2012 to 2015 and 21 per cent in 2004 to 2007 [2, 15]. The proportion of people in unemployment has shown little change in the same period, from 4 per cent in 2004 to 2007 to 5 per cent in 2012 to 2015.

## **8. Discussion**

### **Summary**

This report has brought together findings from three important surveys that help us to understand the employment status of blind and partially sighted people of working age: a detailed analysis of the findings from RNIB's My Voice survey published in 2015, RNIB's secondary analysis of the Labour Force Survey (published

quarterly by the Office of National Statistics; and Network 1000 - a survey of blind and partially sighted people carried out by the University of Birmingham in 2005 - 2007.

By comparing these various studies, it has helpfully provided insight into the trend of blind and partially sighted people's employment status over recent years.

This report also looked in detail at the My Voice survey data, to examine correlations between the employment status of blind and partially sighted people and a wide range of factors such as age, gender, ethnicity, overall health, education qualifications etc. Some of these have been found to be significant, whereas others less so.

In addition, it has included RNIB's analysis of DWP's own administrative data relating to support programmes for blind and partially sighted people looking to gain or retain employment.

Both My Voice and RNIB's analysis of the Labour Force Survey show us that blind and partially sighted people are significantly less likely to be in paid employment than the general population or other disabled people. Only around a quarter of registered blind and partially sighted people of working age are in paid or self-employment, compared with around three quarters of the UK general population.

By comparing the findings of My Voice in 2015 with Network 1000 in 2007, it is clear that there has been a significant decrease in the proportion of registered blind and partially sighted people of working age in any form of employment over the last decade from one in three in 2005 to around one in four in 2015 [9].

## **Factors affecting employment**

This report makes some clear connections between additional factors, such as level of functional vision or additional impairments, and their impact on employment status.

For example: the My Voice survey indicates that only around one in 10 people with poor functional vision are in paid employment (that is, no light perception or not being able to see the shapes of furniture in a room). This compares to 44 per cent of people who

could see well enough to recognise a friend across the road being in paid work.

The impact of additional impairments on employment status is even more evident. Of those taking part in the My Voice survey, 38 per cent of those reporting no other impairments were in employment. This compared to 22 per cent who reported one additional impairment, 15 per cent who reported two additional impairments and only seven per cent of people who reported three or more additional impairments.

However, these factors alone do not paint the full picture. Taken in isolation, they only indicate how personal circumstance can affect employment status, whereas there are many societal and cultural factors that have not been studied here. For example, other studies have indicated that employers have a negative attitude to employing a blind or partially sighted person [17].

Likewise, Government schemes to support disabled people into work, such as the Work Programme, have not significantly helped to improve the overall employment rate of blind and partially sighted people. Whilst we know that the Work Programme helped eight per cent of blind and partially sighted programme participants into paid employment, we do not know enough about their circumstance, or of the remaining 92 per cent that failed to secure employment.

## **Policy implications**

The UK government has an ambition to halve the disability employment gap - that is, the difference between disabled people in work and the general population. Whilst the Labour Force Survey appears to show a small change in employment rates for disabled people in general, it is clear that blind and partially sighted people are significantly less likely to be in paid employment than the general population and other disabled people. Only one in four registered blind or partially sighted people of working age are in paid employment, and over the last decade this number has fallen.

For people living with sight loss, the disability employment gap is therefore widening.

## **Suggestions for further research**

More research needs to be done to find out about the attitude of employers towards employing a blind or partially sighted person, and any other societal or cultural factors, other than personal circumstance, that affect a person's success in employment.

Building on the insights gained from survey data such as My Voice, qualitative research such as focus groups, depth interviews, and personal stories will help to more fully describe the support blind and partially sighted people are being provided in employment. Qualitative research will also shed light on the circumstances of blind and partially sighted people of working age who are not currently in employment.

Additionally, qualitative research will help to complete a picture of the circumstances affecting the employment status of blind and partially sighted people of working age living in the UK today.

## **Conclusion**

This report has helped us to better understand some of the factors that influence the employment of blind and partially sighted people, as well as the trends in the employment status of blind and partially sighted people over the past ten years. It is hoped that it will help policy makers, employers, and service providers to better support blind and partially sighted people of working age to find and keep work, and develop in their careers.

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## **Further information**

“Employment status and sight loss” provides further analysis of existing research to further our understanding of the employment circumstances of blind and partially sighted of working age.

There are many additional resources that provide further information.

## **Evidence based reviews**

Our evidence based review looks in detail at the experience of blind and partially sighted people of working age in the UK. It includes a profile of this group, the policies that govern their employment and economic circumstances, and a commentary on what the evidence tells us. We produce one for each of the UK countries, as employment policy varies slightly across the UK. They are all available (including Word and PDF versions) to download from:

[www.rnib.org.uk/evidence-based-reviews](http://www.rnib.org.uk/evidence-based-reviews)

## **Employment research**

More research around the employment status of people with sight loss, including all the RNIB reports referred to in this report, is available on our knowledge and research hub at:

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

## **Where to find support**

RNIB's website contains lots of information and advice to help blind and partially sighted people prepare for and find employment, start their own business, or stay in their jobs if they are losing their sight. There are lots of useful factsheets, and where to go for further support and information:

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

## **RNIB Knowledge and Research Hub**

Information on the latest research news and reports published by RNIB, as well as guides to impact measurement, blogs and other resources can be found on the RNIB website:

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

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