

People of working age Northern Ireland

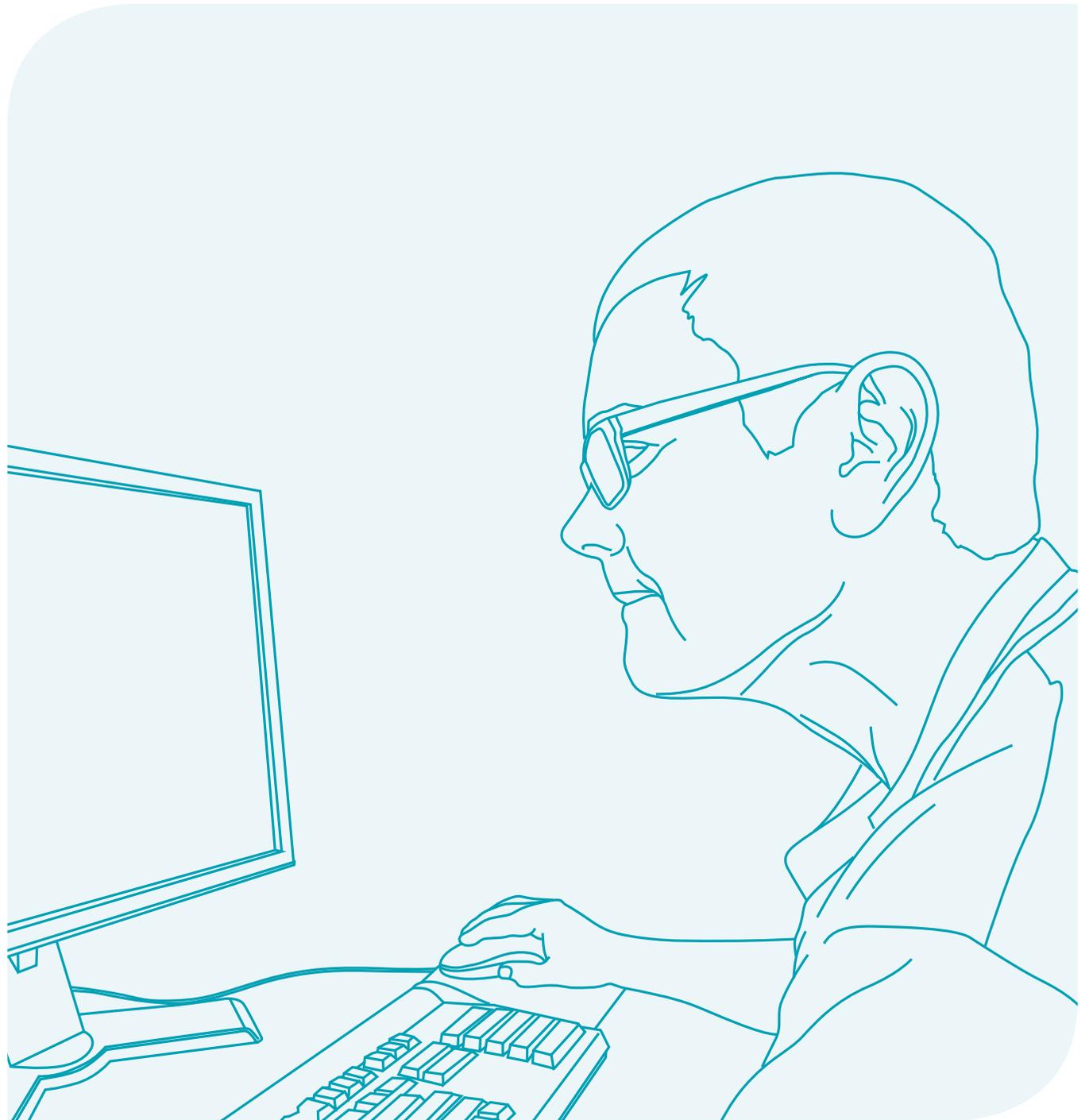
RNIB Evidence-based review

RNIB
Northern
Ireland

Supporting people
with sight loss

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People come from every section of the community and sight loss affects people of all ages. Each is a unique individual. However there are some common issues and challenges that affect blind and partially sighted people in particular age groups.

This review looks in detail at the experience of blind and partially sighted people of working age in Northern Ireland. 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.

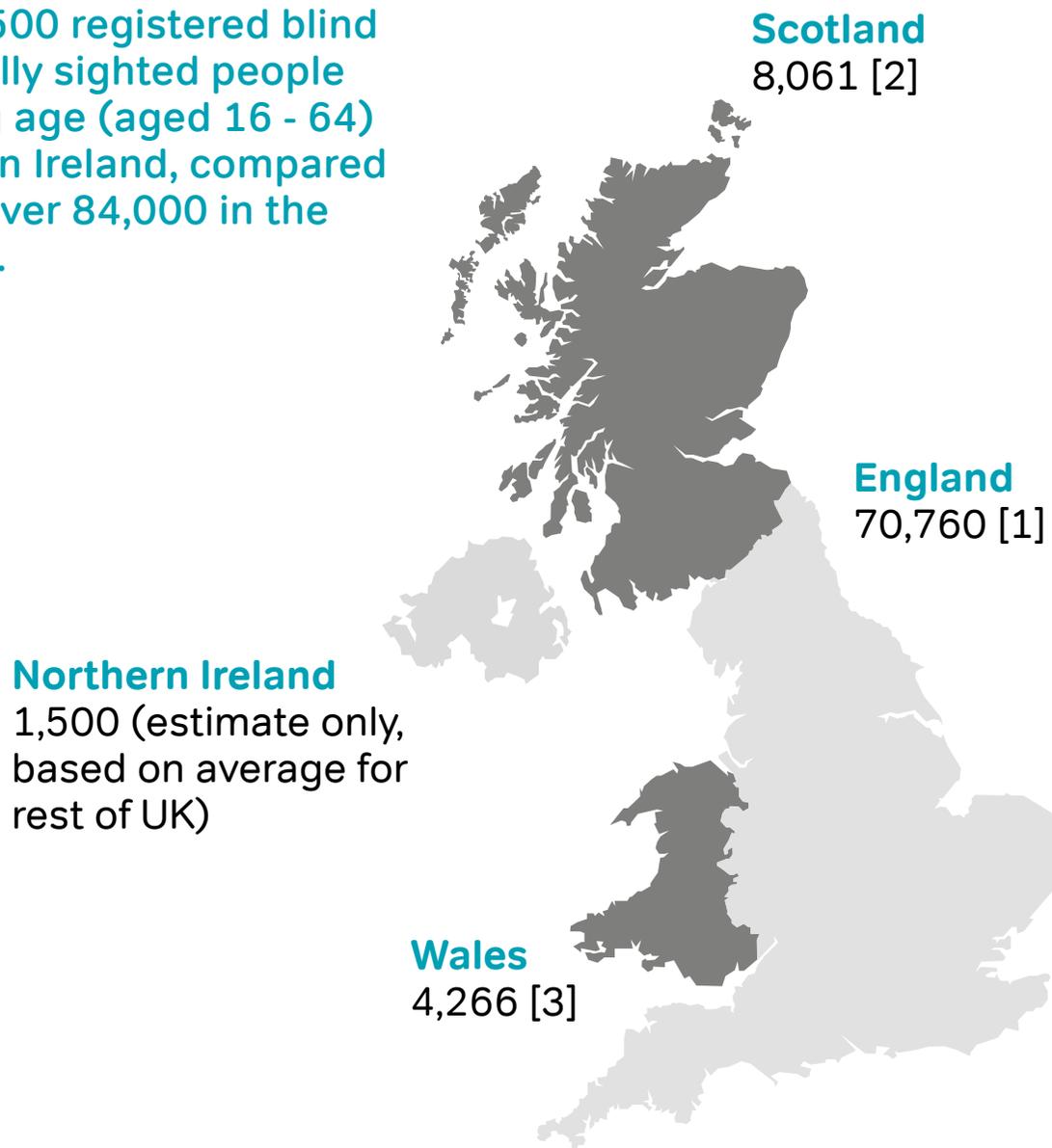
Where relevant it includes reference to devolved legislation but also includes a wider UK evidence base.

Profile

Population

RNIB estimates there are around 1,500 registered blind and partially sighted people of working age (aged 16 - 64) in Northern Ireland, compared with just over 84,000 in the UK overall.

Figures for the UK are:



According to the 2011 Northern Ireland census, around 5,188 people aged 16 - 74 self-reported as having “blindness or partial sight loss” [4]. This includes people whose sight loss may not be eligible for registration, but which is still of sufficient severity to affect their everyday lives. It also includes people aged between 65 - 74.

According to the UK Labour Force Survey, 111,000 people aged 16 - 64 are described as being “long-term disabled with a seeing difficulty” [5].

People with diabetes are

10 to 20

times more likely to lose their sight

Acquired sight loss

An indication of the number of people of working age losing their sight each year can be inferred by the number of new registrations. Figures are not published for Northern Ireland, but wider evidence indicates that in England, around 4,200 people of working age were newly registered as blind (severely sight impaired) or partially sighted (sight impaired) in the year ending March 2014 [1].

Diabetes is one of the leading causes of avoidable sight loss among the working age population in the UK. This is partly attributable to the high incidence of the disease, and its causal link with sight loss. People with diabetes are 10 to 20 times more likely to lose their sight than people without diabetes [6].

The risk of developing retinopathy and other diabetic eye diseases can be reduced if

diabetes is properly managed, and people attend a regular screening programme to detect early signs of eye disease.

However, for the first time in at least five decades, it appears that diabetic retinopathy / maculopathy may no longer be the leading cause of certifiable blindness among working age adults. New evidence suggests that inherited retinal disease appears to represent the commonest cause of certification in the working age population. This has clinical and research implications, including with respect to the provision of care and resources in the NHS and the allocation of research funding [7].

Household income

People with sight loss of working age are much more likely than those with no impairment to face great difficulty making ends meet [8].

People with sight loss are less likely to be high earners and more likely to be on a low income. People with sight loss of working age are around twice as likely than the general population to be living in a household with an income of less than £300 a week [9].

- For those aged 16-44, people with sight loss were twice as likely as those with no impairment to live in a household with an income of less than £300 a week (32 per cent compared to 14 per cent) [9].

- For those aged 45-64, people with sight loss were nearly three times as likely as those with no impairment to live in a household with an income of less than £300 a week (43 per cent compared to 15 per cent) [9].

Findings from RNIB's My Voice survey show that, amongst registered blind and partially sighted people, people of working age consider themselves to be much worse off financially than older people. This may be related to the fact that only around one in four of this group are in employment. The survey shows that:

- 46 per cent of people of working age could not afford to pay for a week's holiday away from home, compared to 18 per cent of people of pension age.
- 46 per cent of working age people could not afford to pay for an unexpected but necessary expense of £500, compared to 20 per cent of people of pension age.
- 15 per cent of people of working age could not afford to keep their house adequately warm, compared to six per cent of people of pension age [10].

Table 1: Total household income of less than £300 per week, by impairment status and age

Age range	People with sight loss	No impairment
16 – 44	32%	14%
45 – 64	43%	15%

Blind and partially sighted people are significantly less likely to be in paid employment than the general population or other disabled people

Employment

Blind and partially sighted people are significantly less likely to be in paid employment than the general population or other disabled people [5]. 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 [10].

Policy context

Disability Discrimination Act

The 1995 Disability Discrimination Act is the main piece of legislation covering the employment of blind and partially sighted people in Northern Ireland [11]. It protects against unfair dismissal on the grounds of disability, and covers issues such as recruitment, retention, terms of employment, reasonable adjustments, and provision of accessible information.

Policy reviews

The current UK government is committed to ‘halving the disability employment gap’ (that is, the difference in the rate of joblessness between disabled and non-disabled people), and intends to set out its plans in a white paper in 2016. The spending review in Autumn 2015 announced a real terms funding increase to help people

with disabilities return to and remain in work [12].

The Minister for Employment and Learning in Northern Ireland launched a public consultation on the ‘Employment Strategy for People with Disabilities’ in September 2015 [13].

This strategy is focused on supporting those people with the most significant disability-related barriers to work, and helping this group to achieve real, paid employment outcomes.

It aims to build on existing disability services in Northern Ireland, and more specifically, the employment support that is delivered through mainstream, as well as community and voluntary sector programmes.

There are five key themes identified within the strategy:

Theme 1 – Supporting people to secure paid employment

Theme 2 – Job retention and career development

Theme 3 – Working with employers

Theme 4 – Research and development

Theme 5 – Strategic partnership and engagement

The public consultation ran until November 2015, and representatives from RNIB Northern Ireland’s Employment Service submitted a response to the proposed strategy paper. The Department will be launching the new strategy in March 2016.

UK government strategy and policy campaigns

Fulfilling Potential

‘Fulfilling Potential’ is the UK government’s main disability strategy for people of working age. A series of five reports

look at building a deeper understanding of disability in the UK today, and considers new ways to enable disabled people to realise their potential, and implement the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Disabled People [14]. The Northern Ireland Assembly has its own arrangements in place to meet the obligations of the UN Convention on the Rights of Disabled People, where those obligations are devolved.

Disability Confident

Recognising that employers are crucial to improving employment outcomes for disabled people, the UK government's Disability Confident campaign is aimed at supporting employers to try and remove barriers that disabled people face at work [15].



Case study

John McNamee, physiotherapist

“I am a self employed physiotherapist working in the centre of Derry City. My work involves the assessment and treatment of back, neck pain and other musculoskeletal injuries for patients who are referred to my clinic. In addition to the usual work of a physiotherapist, I also use acupuncture as part of my treatment for most clients.”

As John is totally blind, he has had to make adjustments to ensure that he is able to do his job.

“The essential ingredient in working solo as a blind person is having control of one’s environment and the technology to overcome the access to print problem.

Firstly, in the clinic, the furniture is organised in such a way that I can move around freely between two rooms. At first glance my workspace looks like any other physiotherapy clinic except that both rooms are identical and chairs are placed in such a way that the client never has to walk in front of me.

Similarly the number and position of phones and intercoms in the rooms, the placement of equipment, appointment cards etc are all designed in a way that allows me to work efficiently without

sight. Speech technology on my computer allows me to maintain patient records and book appointments without assistance. All of these things are fairly minor adaptations but allow me to do my job effectively.”

Prior to being self employed, John worked as a physiotherapist in various London hospitals and private practices before moving home to Derry.

“Physiotherapy is a popular choice of career for blind and partially sighted people and my work experiences have always been positive.

Recently I have been receiving training from RNIB staff who are helping me to make the most of the technology that I use in the workplace, for example word processing, email, internet and my iPhone.

What I would like to say to employers is that if a blind or partially sighted person applies for a job then the chances are that he or she has already adapted to their particular visual impairment and work is merely an extension of their normal life. Employers should not be afraid to ask how sight loss might affect how someone is going to do a job. Societal attitudes to disability are on the move, be a part of the change and not an obstacle to it.”



Services and support

Employment support services

Support for disabled people to find and stay in work is typically provided via one of several schemes funded by the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL). The services are mostly contracted to a small number of prime providers and their supply chain of sub-contractors. However, sight loss is a low incidence disability, and pan-disability service providers may not necessarily have the specialist expertise to support blind and partially sighted people.

Key professionals

The majority of employment services for blind and partially sighted people are delivered by non-specialist, pan-disability organisations. Key professionals working within this group are:

- **Employment Service**
Advisers are employed by the Department for Employment and Learning and are based in the Jobs and Benefits offices throughout Northern Ireland. They can refer people with disabilities to the right services and support programmes to find work and develop skills.
- **Access to Work Advisers**
employed by the Disability Employment Service who provide practical and financial support for disabled people and their employers to overcome work-related obstacles resulting from a disability.
- **Private and voluntary sector employment advisers**
who support disabled (and non-disabled) people into work. This “welfare to work” industry is financed by the various government schemes supporting long-term unemployed people back to work. Many are members of the Employment Related Services Association (ERSA), an umbrella organisation for the industry that supports an increased professionalisation of the workforce.
- **Occupational health and work-based assessment providers** who determine the impact of a health condition or disability upon a person’s ability to perform at work, and can make recommendations for workplace adjustments.
- **HR professionals** working for employers who determine their organisation’s employment policies and practices around disability.
- **Sight loss advisers**, including Eye Clinic/Care Liaison Officers (ECLOs) and Vision Support Officers (VSOs) provide emotional and practical support, and are often the first point of contact for someone losing their sight.

- **Rehabilitation workers** provide mobility training and rehabilitation support for people who have recently lost their sight, and are typically employed or contracted by local authorities.

Employment support in Northern Ireland

In Northern Ireland, employment policy is devolved to the Northern Ireland Executive. Consequently there are specific arrangements for employment support, which currently includes Access to Work (NI), Workable (NI), Job Introduction Scheme, Work Connect and Pathways to Work.

Steps to Success

Steps to Success is the government's main programme to support long-term unemployed people back to work in Northern Ireland. The programme is currently being delivered by three lead contractors, with support from local providers, in different regions in Northern Ireland. The programme is compulsory for those who have been on Jobseeker's Allowance for a specific time and is voluntary for those receiving Employment Support Allowance.

Work Connect

Work Connect is a voluntary programme administered by the Disability Employment Service, to facilitate the employment needs of people with disabilities and/or health conditions. Supported Employment Solutions (SES) partnership has been awarded the sole contract for all of Northern Ireland to deliver the Work Connect Programme. [16]

Work Connect has been designed to support individuals move from incapacity-related benefits (that is, Employment Support Allowance or Incapacity Benefit) into lasting, paid employment through three clearly defined stages.

1. Pre-employment support: during which all clients are offered a range of assistance to improve their employability and to assist them to find a job. This may last up to 26 weeks, (and with prior approval, can be extended for another 13 weeks).
2. Job entry support: to assist the client prepare to move from economic inactivity to start employment.
3. Supporting sustained employment: to assist clients who start work to maintain employment by providing support through their first 26 weeks in work.

Referral onto the Work Connect Programme is via the Jobs and Benefits Office Employment Service Advisers.

Access to Work

Access to Work (NI) is a DEL scheme which provides practical and financial support for blind and partially sighted people in work, and those starting a new job. In the year 2013-14, Access to Work (NI) provided support to 151 clients whose primary condition was ‘difficulty seeing’ out of a live case load of 651. As at 31 March 15 there were 112 clients with sight loss on the programme out of the live case load of 688 [17].

A recent study carried out for RNIB by the Centre for Economic and Social Inclusion concluded that the overall benefits of Access to Work to society outweigh its costs by a considerable margin including that which assists blind and partially sighted individuals, demonstrating that Access to Work is a beneficial form of public spending [18].

Workable (NI)

Workable (NI) is also administered by the Disability Employment Service. It is a flexible programme which assists people with disabilities to return to work or remain in their current job of at least 16 hours a week or more.

SES partnership has also been awarded one of three contracts to deliver the Workable Programme across Northern Ireland.

Each of the SES partners provide their own tailored specialist support to best meet the needs of the individuals they assist in the workplace. Support may include:

- specialist one to one support to the individual
- on the job and/or outside of work training



- specific training identified for the employee to assist them in their work above what the employer would normally offer
- specific disability awareness training to employer and work colleagues
- advice and assistance with making reasonable adjustments in the workplace.

A support package is agreed between the employee, employer and the SES provider for a period of two years. However this can be extended depending on individual needs.

Referral onto the Workable (NI) Programme is via the Jobs and Benefits Office Employment Service Advisers.

Employment and Support Allowance and the Work Capability Assessment

Employment Support Allowance (ESA) is a benefit for disabled people, who are not working. In order to determine eligibility for ESA, a person must undergo a Work Capability Assessment (WCA).

Figures are not available for Northern Ireland, but wider evidence shows that between October 2008 and December 2014 a total of 12,400 blind and partially sighted claimants in Great Britain completed their initial WCA. 41 per cent were assessed as Fit for Work, thereby losing entitlement to ESA. 30 per cent were allocated to the Work Related Activity Group, who receive a lower rate of ESA and are expected to undertake some form of pathway to work, such as participation in the Steps to Success programme in NI, or Work Connect. Just 28 per cent

were allocated to the Support Group, which entitles them to ESA and exempts them from mandatory involvement with pathways into work [19].

Consequently, many blind and partially sighted people are losing their benefits and being told that they are now jobseekers or must attend “work-related activities”, for example the Steps to Success programme, to try to improve their employability.

Between October 2008 and March 2014 a total of 5,000 blind and partially sighted claimants in Great Britain appealed their initial Fit for Work decision. Although most are still awaiting an outcome, we know that 61 per cent of those who received a response have had their appeal upheld [19].

Vision rehabilitation

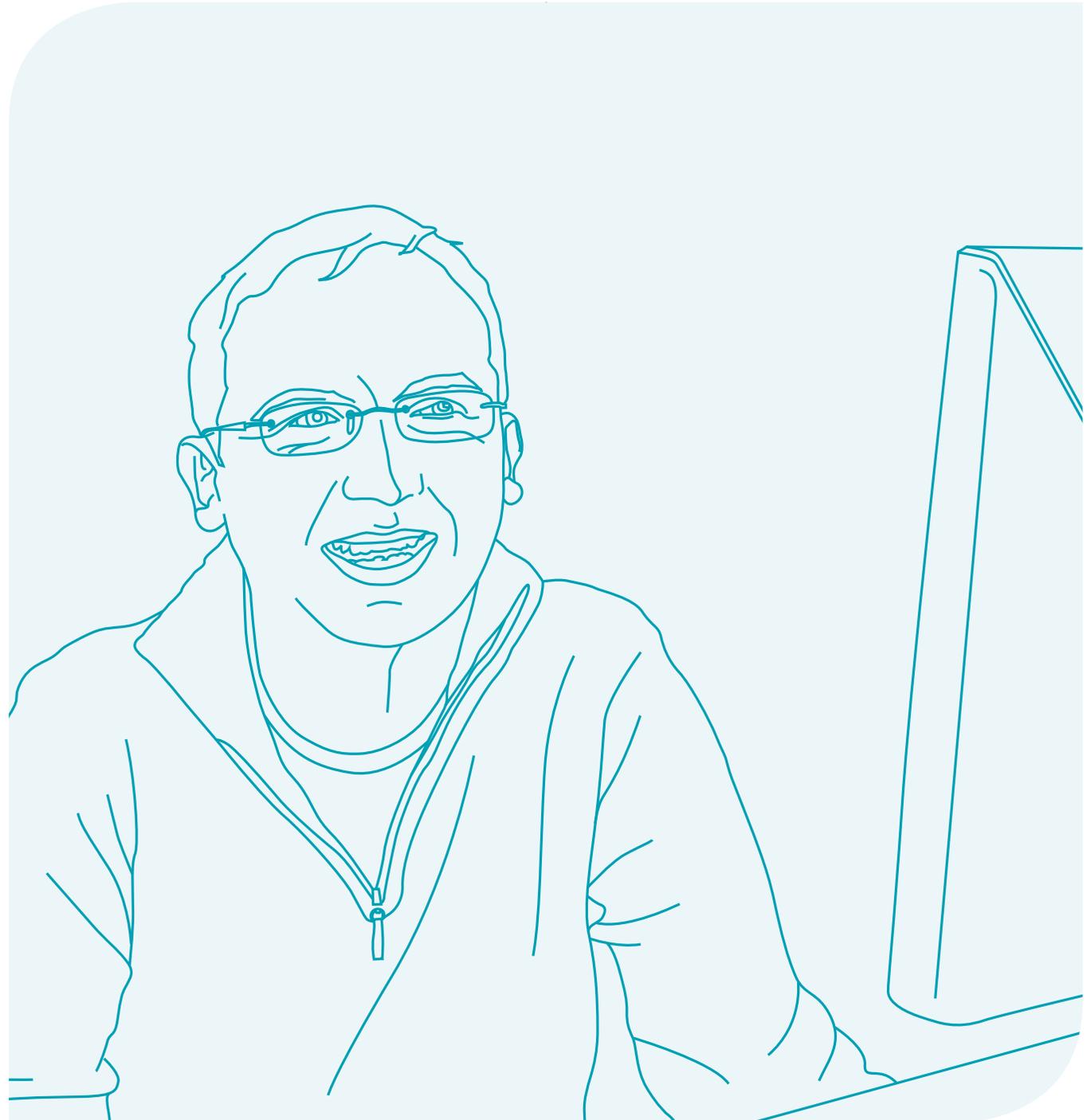
Vision rehabilitation, which is often triggered by the registration process, is a key reablement service for blind and partially sighted people who need to learn a new set of skills. Securing specialist vision rehabilitation support gives people more confidence, helps with learning new skills, and makes them feel safer and helps maintain independence [20]. It also offers cost savings in terms of preventing loss of independence and reliance on other services [21].

Learning from the evidence base

Addressing barriers to the labour market

Evidence suggests that the majority of employers have a negative attitude to employing a blind or partially sighted person [22]. In addition to this, the factors that determine a blind or partially sighted person's distance from the labour market, and whether they are ready for work include:

- being able to self-advocate to employers, explaining what workplace adjustments will be required to carry out particular roles
- confidence and competence using computers adapted with appropriate assistive technology software
- confidence and ability to travel independently using public transport



- access to information via a preferred format of braille, large print, audio or electronic information [23].

Blind and partially sighted people furthest from the labour market require intensive support and specialist interventions in key areas. These include:

- assistive technology skills
- mobility skills
- skills to communicate needs and associated adjustments to employers
- making the most of residual vision
- pre-employment training programmes, designed to meet the complex needs of blind and partially sighted people [23].

Educational qualifications

For blind and partially sighted people, holding an educational qualification is a key enabler for obtaining employment. Educational attainment has a far stronger effect on the likelihood of being in employment for registered blind and partially sighted people compared to the general population. Those with a degree or higher qualification still only have the same chance of getting a job as someone with no qualifications in the general population [24].

In 2013-14, there were 1,040 first year students in higher education in the UK described as being 'blind or with severe visual impairment', representing 0.14 per cent of the first year student population. Of these, 795 (76 per cent) were first year undergraduates and 245 (23 per cent) were first year post-graduates [25].

Increasing the numbers of blind and partially sighted people in employment

One way to increase the numbers of blind and partially sighted people in employment is to focus on increasing the **supply** of blind and partially sighted people to the labour market by building their attributes and capabilities, and increasing the **demand** for meaningful work by supporting creative employment opportunities [26].

Another is to support people with sight loss to keep working. 27 per cent of non-working registered blind and partially sighted people said that the main reason for leaving their last job was the onset of sight loss or deterioration of their sight. However, 30 per cent who were not in work but who had worked in the past said that they maybe or definitely could have continued in their job given the right support [24].

This can be addressed by providing blind and partially sighted people with appropriate vocational rehabilitation support, and helping employers understand the business case for job retention [27].

What the evidence tells us

A recent report into the jobs that blind and partially sighted people do showed how people with sight loss succeed in a wide variety of jobs across almost all employment sectors [28].

However, those looking for work need specialist support on their journey towards employment. In addition to barriers common with anyone out of work for a long period, blind and partially sighted job seekers have specific needs related to their sight loss [23].

Research indicates that those furthest from the labour market require a more resource intensive model of support to those who are actively seeking work. Many blind and partially sighted job seekers fall into this category [23].

The increased pressure on out of work blind and partially sighted people to join employment programmes means greater engagement in welfare to work programmes, and an increasing responsibility for prime contractors and specialist sub-contractors to meet the specific needs of blind and partially sighted job seekers.

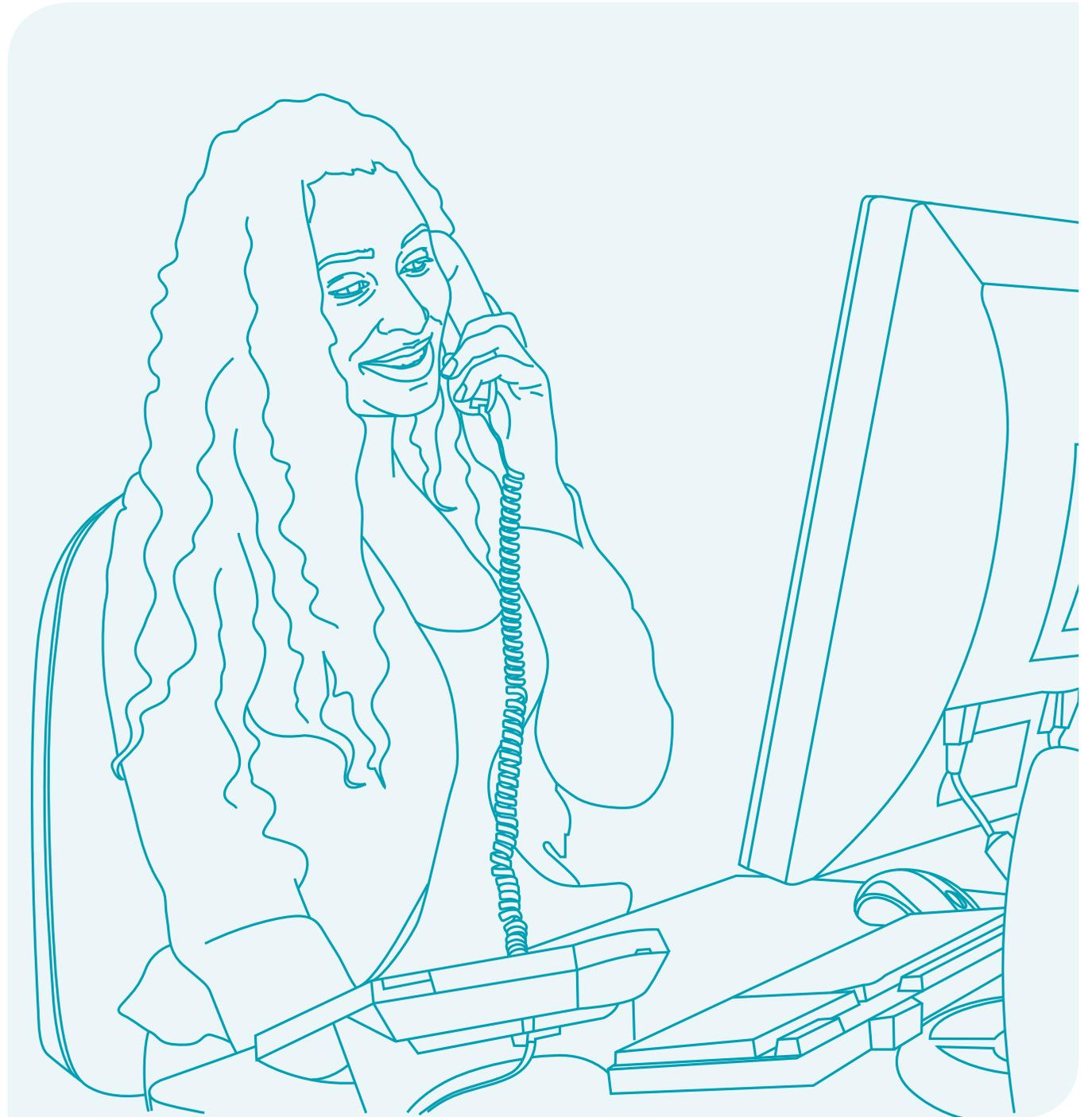
The majority of blind and partially sighted people seeking work are not in contact with the RNIB group of charities. Sharing what we have learned from working with blind and partially sighted people, including those furthest from the labour market, will help other employment support providers to respond to the challenges facing blind and partially sighted people, and improve the quality of employment support offered. Our vision is a welfare to work industry in which all providers have the ability to support blind and partially sighted people seeking employment, and a labour market that offers an innovative range of meaningful employment opportunities.

Employment support and policies for blind and partially sighted people of working age should include:

- specialist employment programmes providing increased numbers of job outcomes and retentions
- improved referral routes to those specialist employment services for blind and partially sighted people
- increased availability of pre-employment support that meets the specific needs of blind and partially sighted job seekers

- increased awareness amongst occupational health providers and human resource professionals of specialist retention services, and referral routes established to deliver this
- an inclusive labour market that offers a range of opportunities with appropriate support
- increased awareness amongst employers and job seekers of positive role models: blind and partially sighted workers and their employers achieving successful outcomes
- criteria for benefits eligibility that fairly assesses the needs of blind and partially sighted people.

These policies will have been effective when there is a sea change in the proportion of blind and partially sighted people of working age achieving greater independence through paid employment.



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About our evidence

RNIB is a leading source of information on sight loss and the issues affecting blind and partially sighted people.

Sight loss data tool

Our Sight loss data tool provides local and regional facts and figures about blind and partially sighted people and those at risk of sight loss.

rnib.org.uk/datatool

Research reports

We carry out and commission a wide range of research on the issues that affect blind and partially sighted people.

rnib.org.uk/research

Knowledge Exchange Network

The Knowledge Exchange Network for the Sight Loss Sector has been set up to help professionals generating and using research and information on sight loss. To find out what the network can offer, and to receive our email updates visit: **rnib.org.uk/ken**

For research enquiries please email **research@rnib.org.uk**

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