

People of working age Scotland

RNIB Evidence-based review

RNIB
Scotland

Supporting people
with sight loss

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Blind and partially sighted 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 Scotland. 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

There are around 8,000 registered blind and partially sighted people of working age in Scotland, compared with just over 84,000 in the UK overall.

Figures for the UK are:

Northern Ireland

1,500 (estimate only, based on average for rest of UK)

Wales

4,266 [3]

Scotland

8,061 [2]

England

70,760 [1]

According to the UK Labour Force Survey, around 170,000 people of working age in the UK have a self-reported “seeing difficulty”.

This includes people whose sight loss would not be eligible for registration, but which is still of sufficient severity to affect their everyday lives. (It also includes those who do not consider themselves as disabled.) Of those, 111,000 are described as being “long-term disabled with a seeing difficulty” [4].

Acquired sight loss

An indication of the number of people of working age losing their sight each year can be inferred from the number of new registrations. In the year 2010, just over 600 people of working age were newly registered as blind (severely sight impaired) or partially sighted (sight impaired) in Scotland [2].

People with diabetes are

10 to 20

times more likely to lose their sight

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 [5].

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 [6].

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 [7].

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 [8].

- For those aged 16-44, people with sight loss are 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) [8].

- For those aged 45-64, people with sight loss are 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) [8].

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 [9].

Employment

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].

Table 1: Total household income of less than £300 per week, by no impairment status and age

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

Only

27 per cent

of blind and partially sighted people of working age are in employment

Policy context

Equality Act

In 2010, the Equality Act replaced the 1995 Disability Discrimination Act, as the main piece of legislation covering the employment of blind and partially sighted people [10]. 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

Employment policy in Scotland is in a period of transition. The Public Bodies (Joint Working) (Scotland) Act which will integrate Health and Social Care in Scotland, will be fully enacted by 1 April 2016 and the provisions set out by the Smith Commission are under further scrutiny regarding devolved powers for Scotland.

Both policies are likely to have significant elements which will impact on employability for blind and partially sighted people.

The Scottish Government are also currently consulting on the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) – The Scottish Government’s Draft Delivery Plan 2016-2020. This will have implications for current policy positions on employability, specifically in supporting disabled young people and those of working age into the world of work.

‘The Disability Agenda Scotland manifesto: Our vision for an equal future’ sets out specific calls to action around employability for disabled people and will be considered as evidence to support any considerations for future policy changes in Scotland.

Scottish Government strategy and policy campaigns

Creating a Fairer Scotland

– Employability Support:

A Discussion Paper

Employment policy in Scotland is currently being shaped by a consultation exercise in preparation for devolution of employment support. This discussion paper seeks views on the future delivery model of employment support in Scotland following devolution of the Department for Work and Pensions' Work Choice and Work Programme schemes in April 2017. Thereafter, Scotland will have new powers to provide employment support for disabled people and those at risk of long term unemployment [11].

Skills for Scotland: Accelerating the Recovery and Increasing Sustainable Economic Growth

The skills strategy makes clear the government's commitment to skills and training to help address Scotland's skills needs and improve economic performance. The strategy has four priority themes: empowering Scotland's people, supporting Scotland's employers, simplifying the skills system, and strengthening partnerships [12].

Developing the Young Workforce: Scotland's Youth Employment Strategy

Developing the Young Workforce sets out how the Scottish Government will implement the recommendations from the Commission for Developing Scotland's Young Workforce to drive the creation of a world class vocational education system to reduce youth unemployment by 40 per cent by 2021 [13].

The UK government is committed to halving the disability employment gap



Curriculum for Excellence

Curriculum for Excellence is the national curriculum for Scottish schools for learners from age 3 to 18. It was developed out of a 2002 consultation exercise – the ‘National Debate on Education’ – undertaken by the then Scottish Executive on the state of school education. The curriculum covers employability skills [14].

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 [15]. The Scottish Government 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 [16].

Case study

Mark Wilson

Mark Wilson (35) has worked as an assistant engineer with Dundee City Council for the past five years. Mark has been severely short-sighted since birth and is registered as partially sighted.

“I have high myopia, with complicating conditions such as nystagmus and astigmatism,” he explains. “I can see things very close up but the further away they are, the less detail I can make out.”

Originally from Bathgate in West Lothian, Mark studied mechanical engineering at Abertay University in Dundee.

“I work in road maintenance alongside the various contractors we have,” he goes on. “I got my present job after a work placement arranged by the Employment Disability Unit. At the end of the two months, Dundee City Council offered me a job. I wasn’t particularly daunted when I began. I’d actually done much of the same work before when I worked for a consulting engineer in the private sector.

Most of my work is based in the office. On site, I’ve always been accompanied by someone else. But that’s as much to do with transport getting there as anything else.

My job can be pretty visual. But the mapping software I use is reasonably accessible with high contrast colours. Most things I can alter through Windows software or enlarge on the photocopier.

I feel I am really well-integrated with my team. There are some things colleagues can do better than me, of course, but we take it in our stride.

So there’s never been anything that’s really been an issue so far. As an employer, the council has always been very accommodating, but the changes they have had to make were minimal because I’ve been able to adapt to the job relatively easily. The only things required have been large PC monitors. The council treats me the same as anybody else.”

Was there a time when he was pessimistic about his career chances?

“Yes,” he says, “there was a period in my life when I applied for jobs, mainly in the private sector, when I’d get a no straight off the bat. When I asked them they said they were concerned

about employing someone with sight loss. I was applying for jobs I was confident I was capable of doing but getting a flat turn-down.

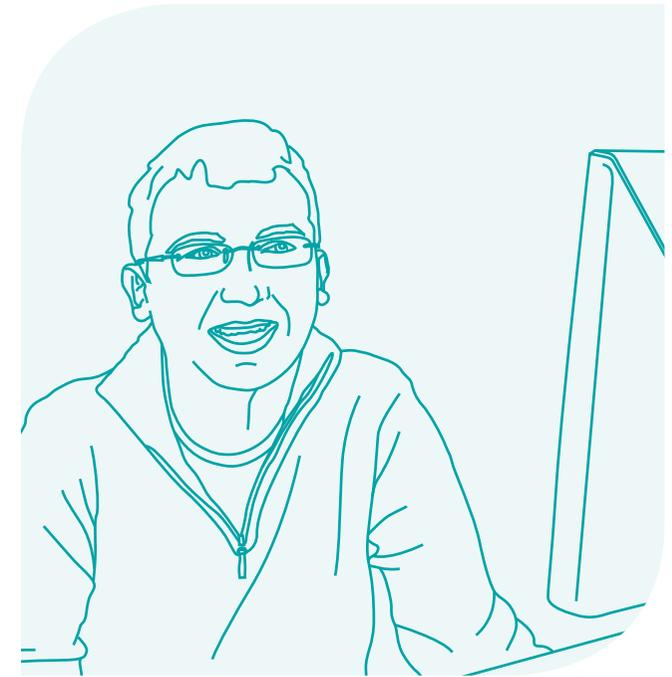
But people with sight loss can be valuable employees. It's about finding the right person for the right job and dealing with their needs. It's the person first. Deal with sight loss as an after fact. If they are the right person for the job you'll find a way around the disability. For instance, are the essential requirements given in the job specification, such as having a driving licence, really essential? But it requires effort on both sides – not just the employer.”

Senior engineer Ronnie Mackenzie is Mark's line manager. He says: “The biggest compliment I can give Mark is that everyone forgets he has

sight loss. Except when people wave at him, that is, and he doesn't respond!

Mark is re-writing the rule-book on what it is to be an assistant engineer. He has a real talent for mixing engineering and IT. This is where his skill-set is. He's very good at finding solutions and has promoted new ways of working. He's made us far more IT aware. We don't use nearly as much paper as we did!

When we were planning the road-gritting, Mark used Google Streetview instead of driving along the streets in a car. He was nominated by the team to receive a letter from First Minister Alex Salmond congratulating him on the work done on maintaining the roads in the bad winter we had two years ago.”



“Mark is re-writing the rule-book on what it is to be an assistant engineer.”

**Ronnie Mackenzie,
Senior engineer and
Mark's line manager**

Services and support

Statutory employment support services

Support for disabled people to find and stay in work is currently 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 and agencies

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:

- Skills Development Scotland (SDS) Advisers work for Scotland's all-age advice and guidance service. The service provides advice and guidance through a network of offices in Scotland and concentrates on the younger age group of blind and partially sighted people, although not exclusively.
- Disability Employment Advisers employed by Jobcentre Plus, who refer people with disabilities to the right services and support programmes to find work and develop skills.
- Access to Work Employment Advisers, employed by Momentum Skills or their supply chain of sub-contractors, provide assessment services for disabled people.
- 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.
- Local authority employability advisers are based within 32 local authorities, and have some responsibility to provide employment support services as part of locally funded projects. Some local authorities will also have a supported employment service which targets support for disabled job seekers.

The Work Programme helped just 6 per cent of blind and partially sighted people enrolled on the programme into paid employment

- 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 Scotland

From 1 April 2017, employment support services in Scotland will change significantly and will differ from the rest of the UK. New powers to provide employment support for disabled people and those at risk of long term unemployment will be devolved to Scotland. This means the current Work Programme and Work Choice schemes run by the UK Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) will be replaced by a new Scottish service to provide support, work experience and training to help Scotland's people find work,

and stay in work. Consultation about the future of employability support in Scotland is currently underway [11].

In the meantime, charities such as RNIB, Action for Blind People, and Thomas Pocklington Trust make up for the inadequacy of statutory services to properly support blind and partially sighted people to find and keep work. Last year alone, the RNIB group of charities supported over 600 blind and partially sighted people to find work or keep their job [17], with very little access to the statutory funding allocated to employment support services in Scotland.

Work Programme

The Work Programme is the UK government's main programme to support long-term unemployed people back to work in England, Scotland and Wales. Of the 1,010 blind or partially sighted people enrolled on the programme between June 2011 and March 2014, it helped just 60 (approximately six per cent) into paid employment [18].

A Work and Pensions Select Committee report entitled "Can the Work Programme work for all user groups?", concluded that the Work Programme is not providing incentives to contracted providers to support those with more challenging barriers to employment (for example blind and partially sighted people) [19].

Work Choice

Work Choice is a UK government programme that provides a specialist employment service for disabled people and their employers across Great Britain via a network of prime providers and sub-contractors.

Between April 2011 and March 2015, 2,830 people whose primary disability was described as "visual impairment" have been referred to the Work Choice programme. Of those, 2,070 started on the programme and 840 have achieved a job outcome [20].

Access to Work

Access to Work (AtW) is a DWP scheme that provides practical and financial support for blind and partially sighted people in work, and those starting a new job.



In the year 2014–15, AtW provided support to 5,220 people whose primary medical condition was “difficulty with seeing.” This is a similar figure to the previous year, and is 3 per cent higher than the average for the past five years [21].

In the year 2013-14, just over £23m was awarded in AtW grants to people whose primary medical condition was “difficulty with seeing.” This represents approximately 22 per cent of the overall grant spend.

A recent study carried out for RNIB by the Centre for Economic and Social Inclusion concluded that the overall benefits of AtW to society outweigh its costs by a considerable margin including that which assists blind and partially sighted individuals, demonstrating that AtW is a beneficial form of public spending [22].

AtW came under scrutiny by a Work and Pensions select committee in 2014, which informed an internal review being carried out at the time. Its report made a series of recommendations, which will hopefully lead to substantial improvements to the programme [23].

Fit for Work service

Fit for Work is a new service that helps employees stay in or return to work. It provides an occupational health assessment and general health and work advice to employees, employers and GPs. It is designed to complement existing occupational health services provided by employers, and aims to fill the gap in support that currently exists, especially for those employers who have limited in-house occupational health services.

Fit for Work is a GB wide service. In Scotland it is provided by the Scottish Government.

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).

Between October 2008 and December 2014 a total of 12,400 blind and partially sighted claimants completed their initial WCA. 1,100 of these were in Scotland. Overall, 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 Work Programme or Work Choice. Just 28 per cent were allocated to the Support Group, which entitles them to the higher rate of ESA and exempts them from mandatory involvement with pathways into work [24]. (The figures for Scotland reflect these overall percentages.)

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 Work Programme, to try to improve their employability.



Between October 2008 and March 2014 a total of 5,000 blind and partially sighted claimants 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 [24].

Vision rehabilitation

Vision rehabilitation, which is often triggered by the registration process, is a key re-enablement 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 [25]. It also offers cost savings in terms of preventing loss of independence and reliance on other services [26].

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 [27]. 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 [28].

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 [28].

Educational attainment

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 [29].

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 [30].

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 [31].

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 [29].

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 [32].

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 [33].

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 [28].

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 [28].

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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