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Introduction

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.

Every year RNIB publishes “Sight loss UK”, which reviews the evidence we have about the lives of people living with sight loss.

This review looks in more detail at the experience of blind and partially sighted people of “working age”. 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.

Profile

Population

There are just over 84,000 registered blind and partially sighted people of working age in the UK:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>Registered blind and partially sighted people of working age</th>
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<tr>
<td>England</td>
<td>70,760 [1]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scotland</td>
<td>8,061 [2]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wales</td>
<td>3,795 [3]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northern Ireland</td>
<td>1,400 (estimate only, based on average for rest of UK)</td>
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However, according to the government’s Labour Force Survey, around 185,000 people of working age in the UK have a self-reported “seeing difficulty” [4]. 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 the 185,000:

- 113,000 consider themselves as long-term disabled with a “seeing difficulty”
- 72,000 consider themselves as not disabled with a “seeing difficulty”
Acquired sight loss

Around 4,200 people of approximate working age (ie 20–64 years old) in England and Wales were registered as blind (severely sight impaired) or partially sighted (sight impaired) in the year April 2013 to March 2014 [1].

Diabetes is the leading cause of sight loss among the working age population the UK. This is partly attributable to the increasing 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 is significantly reduced if diabetes is properly managed and people attend regular screening programmes to detect early signs of eye disease.

Household income

People with sight loss of working age are more likely than those in the general population to live in a household with an income of less than £300 a week. Within this group the scale of the difference varies across age groups [6].

• For people aged 16–44 the proportions in households with an income of less than £300 a week were:
  • 32 per cent with sight loss
  • 31 per cent with another type of impairment
  • 14 per cent with no impairment
  • 19 per cent the general working age population.

• For people aged 45–64 the proportions in households with an income of less than £300 a week were:
  • 43 per cent with sight loss
  • 33 per cent with another type of impairment
  • 15 per cent with no impairment
  • 22 per cent the general working age population.

Forty five per cent of working age blind and partially sighted people describe their financial situation as “just getting by” or worse [6].

Services and support

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 one in three registered blind and partially sighted people of working age is in paid employment. They are nearly five times more likely than the general population to have had no paid work for five years.

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 [7].

**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:

- **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 Advisers** employed by Jobcentre Plus, 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.
Policy context and related provision

Policy reviews
Policy is being shaped by a series of recent reviews into the employment, health and benefits status of disabled people of working age. Those affecting the lives of blind and partially sighted people of working age include the following:

- **Getting in, staying in and getting on.** In her report to government, Liz Sayce reviews disability employment support, access to benefits, and the connection between employment and health [8].

- **An independent review of the Work Capability Assessment.** Dr Paul Litchfield reports on the fourth of five annual, independent reviews of the WCA [9]. He is due to report on the fifth and final review by December 2014.

- **Working for a Healthier Tomorrow.** In her report to government, Dame Carol Black reviews the health of Britain’s working age population, and makes the connection between long-term health problems and employability [10].

- **Fulfilling Potential.** The Department of Work and Pension’s report looks 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 [11]. This is supported by an action plan called Fulfilling Potential – Making it Happen.

Equality Act
In 2010, the Equality Act replaced the 1995 Disability Discrimination Act (DDA), as the main piece of legislation covering the employment of blind and partially sighted people [12]. 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. In Northern Ireland, the DDA is still the law.

Work Programme
The Work Programme is the 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 since June 2011, it has helped just 60 (approx 6 per cent) into paid employment [13].

A Work and Pensions Select Committee report entitled “Can the Work Programme work for all user groups?”, concludes 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) [14].

In Northern Ireland, The Department of Employment and Learning has developed a new support programme called Steps 2 Success (NI). RNIB Northern Ireland and other disability organisations worked closely with the Department of Employment and Learning to help learn from the experiences of the Work Programme in Great Britain, so that any shortcomings with respect to disabled people are not replicated in Northern Ireland.

**Work Choice**

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

Between April 2011 and March 2014, 2,180 people whose primary disability was described as “visual impairment” have been referred to the Work Choice programme. Of those, 1,540 started on the programme and 520 have achieved a job outcome [15].

**Access to Work**

The government’s Access to Work scheme 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 provided support to 5,120 people whose primary medical condition was “difficulty with seeing.” This was an increase of nearly 5 per cent over the previous year [16].

**Employment and Support Allowance and the Work Capability Assessment**

Employment Support Allowance (ESA) is a benefit for disabled people in Great Britain, 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 2013 a total of 10,300 blind and partially sighted claimants completed their initial WCA. Nearly 45 per cent were assessed as Fit for Work, thereby losing entitlement to ESA. Just over a third (35 per cent) were allocated to the Work Related Activity Group, who, although entitled to ESA, are expected to undertake some form of pathway to work such as participation in the Work Programme or Work Choice. Just 20 per cent were allocated to the Support Group, which entitles them to ESA and exempts them from mandatory involvement with pathways into work [17].

Consequently, 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 2013 a total of 4,400 blind and partially sighted claimants appealed their initial Fit for Work decision. Although most are still awaiting an outcome, we know that 65 per cent of those who have received a response have had their appeal upheld [17].

**Devolution**

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

**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 [18]. 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 [19].

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 [19].
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 [20].

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 [6].

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 [21].

What the evidence tells us

Blind and partially sighted people 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 jobseekers have specific needs related to their sight loss [19].

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 jobseekers fall into this category [19].

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 subcontractors to meet the specific needs of blind and partially sighted jobseekers.

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 jobseekers
- increased awareness within 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 jobseekers 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.

References

Further information and links to all the references listed in this section can be found at our Knowledge and research hub: rnib.org.uk/research


17 Keil, 2014. *Initial Work Capability Assessments: comparison between blind and partially sighted people and all ESA claimants.* RNIB briefing based on freedom of information request to DWP for statistics relating to ESA claimants who are blind or partially sighted.


About our evidence-based reviews

This evidence-based review is one of a series produced by RNIB researchers. Each review brings together key research about blind and partially sighted people of different age groups.

The series includes:

- children and young people
- people of working age
- older people.

In addition 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.

- **Sight loss UK.** Our annual evidence review, based on 70 key indicators that show us what life is like for people with sight loss, their carers and those at risk of sight loss.

- **Primary research.** We commission and conduct primary research to understand the circumstances of blind and partially sighted people.

- **Data analysis.** We commission and conduct secondary analysis of data sets to learn more about the experiences of blind and partially sighted people and those at risk of sight loss.

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