



# People of working age England

RNIB Evidence-based review

**RNIB**

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.

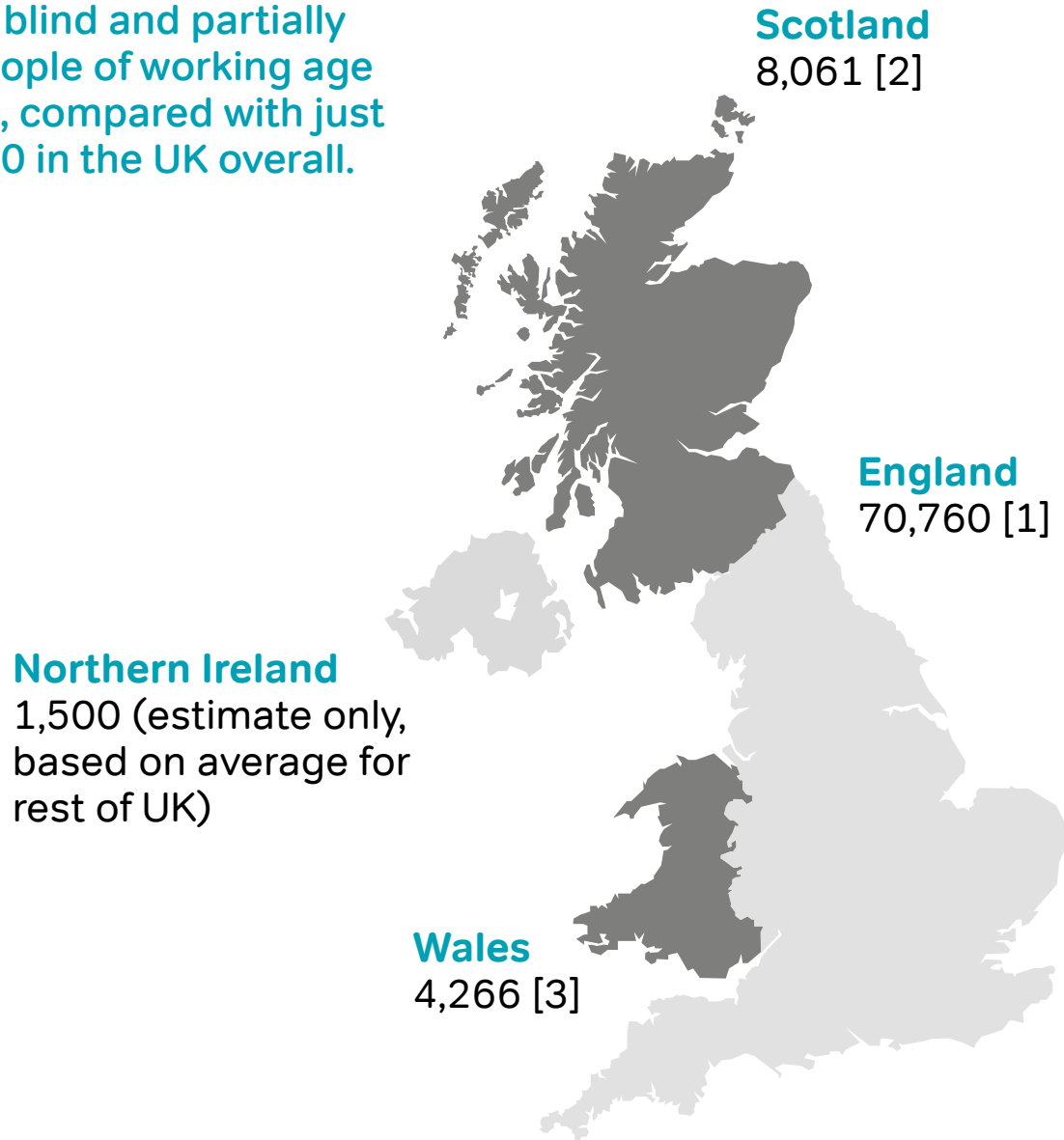
This review looks in detail at the experience of blind and partially sighted people of working age in England. It includes a profile of this group, the policies that govern their employment and economic circumstances, and a commentary on what the evidence tells us.

# Profile

## Population

There are just over 70,000 registered blind and partially sighted people of working age in England, compared with just over 84,000 in the UK overall.

Figures for the UK are:



According to the 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 by the number of new registrations. In the year 2010, around 4,200 people of working age were newly registered as blind (severely sight impaired) or partially sighted (sight impaired) throughout England [1].

**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 in England and Wales. 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 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) [8].

- 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) [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 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

## Transitions

Young people defined as having a 'vision impairment' are well represented in further education. In England in 2012-13, a total of 5,600 young people under the age of 19 were undertaking further education and skills training (including apprenticeships). This represents 0.5 per cent of all learners in this age range. A further 3,730 were aged 19 to 24 (0.46 per cent).

A further breakdown of these figures reveals that 4,360 of these young people were on further education and skills training courses with English and Maths as key components (0.6 per cent of all learners up to the age of 24 on these courses) [10]. These were previously known as 'Skills for Life' courses, which were designed to give people the reading, writing, maths and communication skills

they need in everyday life, to operate effectively in work, and to help them succeed on other training courses [11].

In 2012-13, only 0.35 per cent of young people under the age of 25 on apprenticeships were blind or partially sighted. Success rates for these trainees were slightly lower than for other apprentices: 66 per cent for blind or partially sighted apprentices aged 19 to 24, compared with 72 per cent of all apprentices in the same age group [10].

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 [12].

## 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 [13]. 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

Policy around employment was shaped during the last government by a series of 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 2011 report to the UK government, Liz Sayce reviewed disability employment support, access to benefits, and the connection between employment and health [14].
- **Working for a Healthier Tomorrow.** In her 2011 independent review of sickness absence, Dame Carol Black reviewed the health of Britain's working age population, and made the connection between long-term health problems and employability. She identified a lack of access to occupational

**The UK government is committed to halving the disability employment gap**





health provision as one of the issues preventing employees returning to work. The UK government accepted her recommendation to introduce an independent Fit For Work service to help employees on sick leave get back to work [15].

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 [16].

## 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 [17].

### **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 [18].

## Case study

### Margaret Cutter, East Durham Homes

Margaret's sight loss was completely unexpected and happened very quickly following a blood haemorrhage in both eyes. Emergency laser surgery stopped the bleeding, but the damage was already done and she is now registered blind.

"The bottom dropped out of my world," explains Margaret, who was working as a receptionist at East Durham Homes. "I could no longer see the people in front of me. I could make out outlines, but no detail; my confidence sapped away overnight. My career and the life I took for granted were surely over."

East Durham Homes was very supportive. Working with Action for Blind People, they introduced assistive technology, provided training and secured Access to Work funding.

Margaret's life has been transformed. Thanks to the forward thinking attitude of East Durham Homes, she is able to keep working, now as an administrator, and is equipped to overcome the barriers imposed by limited vision. A screen magnifier increases the size of print on her computer, whilst 'talking' software reads the content on the screen. She also has a portable magnifier, allowing her to see what's around her, from the telephone to paperwork and files.

Margaret says: "The wonderful gadgets, recognition of my capabilities by East Durham Homes, and my own determination not to be defeated by sight loss; they've all combined to put my life back on track. Today's technology really can compensate for sight loss."



**“East Durham  
Homes demonstrated  
real commitment  
which deserves to  
be acknowledged.”**

**Action for Blind People’s  
Regional Operations  
Manager, Sharon Meadows.**



# 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 Work and Pensions (DWP). 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:

- **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.

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

- **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 England**

Government programmes for supporting long-term unemployed people into work are currently under review, with service delivery contracts being renewed in 2017.

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 [19], with very little access to the statutory funding allocated to employment support services in England.

### **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 [20].

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) [21].

### Work Choice

Work Choice is a DWP 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 [22].

### 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 [23].

In the year 2013-14, just over £23,000 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 [24].

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 [25].



### 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 England it is provided by Health Management Limited.

## Employment and Support Allowance and the Work Capability Assessment

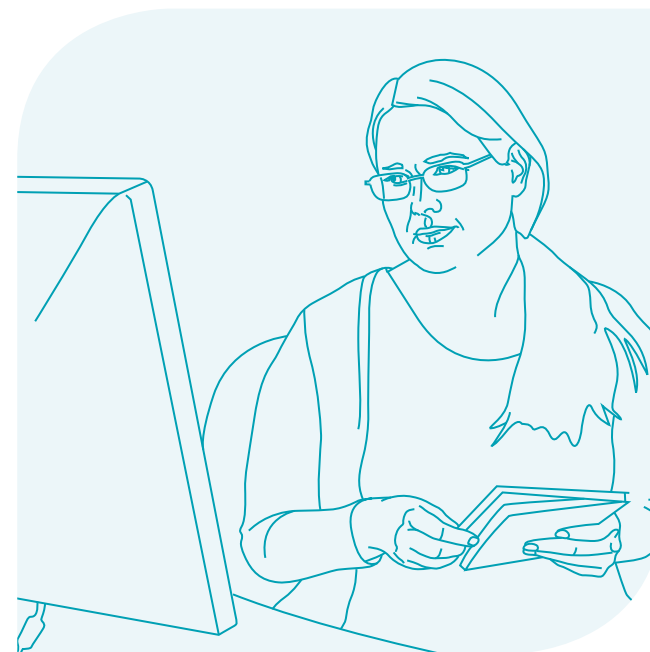
Employment Support Allowance (ESA) is a benefit for disabled people, who are not working. In order to determine eligibility for ESA, a person must undergo a Work Capability Assessment (WCA).

Between October 2008 and December 2014 a total of 12,400 blind and partially sighted claimants completed their initial WCA. 10,600 of these were in England. 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 [26]. (The figures for England 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 [26].





## 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 [27]. It also offers cost savings in terms of preventing loss of independence and reliance on other services [28].

While the Care Act 2014 [29] offers a strong framework for local authorities to provide vision rehabilitation and preventative services for blind and partially sighted people in England, specialist vision rehabilitation services are under significant threat and those who need it often wait over six months after making contact to receive a visit from social services [9].

## 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 [30].

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 [31].

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 [31].

### 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 [32].

### 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

**People with sight loss succeed in a wide variety of jobs across almost all employment sectors**

supporting creative employment opportunities [33].

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 [32].

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 [34].

**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 [35].

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 [31].

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 [31].

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.

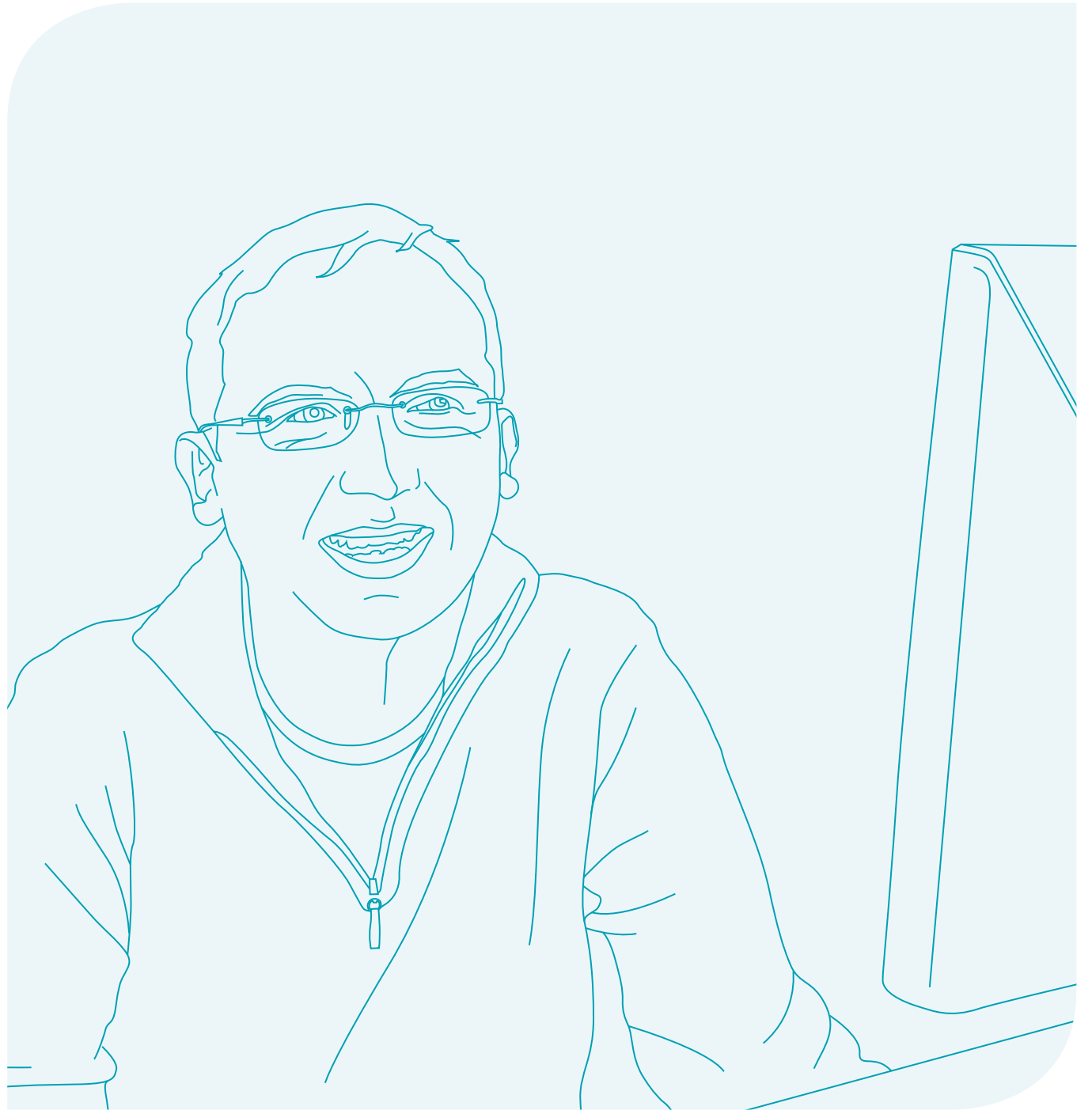
Employment support and policies for blind and partially sighted people of working age should include:

- 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](https://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](https://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](https://rnib.org.uk/ken)**

For research enquiries please email **[research@rnib.org.uk](mailto:research@rnib.org.uk)**

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