

Creating workplace opportunities for blind and partially sighted people

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Chapter one

The economic growth in Scotland over the past few years has led to a substantial reduction in the levels of unemployment for many Scots. However blind and partially sighted people have not benefited much from the various programmes to raise employability and for them unemployment has remained static at around 75%. The RNIB, argues that work is the main means through which the social and economic exclusion of blind and partially sighted people can be reduced.

Chapter two:

Size and characteristics of the client group

Local authorities are required to keep a register of blind and partially sighted people living in their area. This helps in the administration of statutory services and benefits. The local authorities may keep and manage the registers themselves or contract this out to a local organisation. To be eligible for registration a person has to meet certain medical criteria and be certified by an ophthalmologist as blind or partially sighted. Registration is voluntary. Benefits include the blind person's personal income tax allowance, reduction in the cost of the TV licence, car parking concessions under the Blue Badge Scheme, free postage on items marked "Articles For The Blind", help with telephone installation charges and line rental, adaptive equipment and specialist support, the disabled person's railcard and access to local travel schemes.

38,366 individuals are registered with local authorities as being blind or partially sighted. Out of this, 7,383 (nearly 20%) are between the ages 16-64 years. Fletcher et al. (2006), have estimated under-registration of about 10%, so the number out of work is likely to be about 8,120

The Labour Force Survey (2005) showed that of 25859 individuals:

- 1.3% reported difficulty in seeing, equating to roughly 44,000 people in Scotland.
- 0.4% said that difficulty in seeing was their main health problem: roughly 13,500 people in Scotland.
- 82% of those who had difficulty in seeing said that it limited their day-to-day activities.
- 75% of those who had difficulty in seeing said it limited the amount of work they could do, and 84% said it limited the kind of work they could do. Only 33% of people of working age who have difficulty in seeing are in employment than the working age compared with 75% for the population as a whole.
- People with sight problems are employed in a range of employment sectors, but are more likely to be employed in public administration, education and health, distribution, hotels and restaurants, and banking, finance and insurance.

Types of benefits claimed

A total of about 4,500 individuals of working age in Scotland were receiving *Disability Living Allowance* due to blindness as at November 2005 (an increase of 600 from November 2000). Claiming DLA does not preclude individuals from working, so these data cannot be used to estimate the number of working age blind and partially sighted people who are jobless.

There are approximately 1700 people on *Incapacity Benefit/Severe Disablement Allowance (IB/SDA)* recorded as having 'disease of the eye and adnexa'. The total number of IB claimants among the general population has fallen by nearly 25,000 since 2000, but there has been a slight increase in the number of people with 'disease of the eye and adnexa'.

Patterns of employment

Although people with visual impairment work in a range of occupations and sectors there is little quantitative information about the numbers employed in particular occupations and industries. Nevertheless, some survey evidence suggests that there are occupational sectors, such as IT and financial services which present more opportunities or which may be more receptive to hiring people with visual impairment.

Of those with difficulty in seeing who were in employment in 2005, the biggest proportion were working in public administration, education and

health (29 per cent), distribution, hotels and restaurants (26 per cent), banking, finance and insurance etc (14 per cent) and manufacturing (12 per cent).

In 2005, those with difficulty in seeing were much more likely to be employed in 'elementary' occupations and in administrative and secretarial roles than the total working age population (elementary occupations – 21 per cent versus 11 per cent; administrative and secretarial – 20 per cent versus 13 per cent). In contrast, those with difficulty in seeing were much less likely to be employed in professional and associate professional and technical occupations in 2005 than the total working age population (cumulative percentage – 7 per cent versus 27 per cent) (Table 11).

Chapter three: Barriers to work

Employer attitudes

It is clear that a common barrier faced by blind and partially sighted people is the negative perception that employers have of their abilities. There is some evidence that employers may perceive sight loss to be more problematic than other forms of disabilities.

Compounding negative attitudes is general lack of awareness among employers about the range of support available to assist in their employment. Many employers, for example, are not aware of the services provided by organisations such as RNIB, or assistance such as the Access to Work scheme, which enables blind and partially sighted people to work without extra costs to their employers.

In a survey of visually impaired people conducted by RNIB, interviewees felt that although many had encountered negative employer attitudes when they were looking for work. However several interviewees reported that once they had moved into work, employer support had been excellent and was a key factor in sustaining employment.

Adjustment or adaptation costs

The financial costs of making the necessary adjustment when hiring a blind or partially sighted person can be high. Adaptable computer software for example can cost as much as £800 to £900. However employers may be unaware of support schemes available that could offset the adaptation costs of hiring a blind or partially sighted person.

Case studies illustrate how employers can support a person with a visual impairment: some implement their own support systems and others access external sources such as Access to Work. Also people who are blind and partially sighted can lose confidence and a range of the softer skills which are important in the labour market.

Inaccessible information, recruitment and selection

Inaccessible information is also a major barrier to blind and partially sighted people looking for work. Information about vacancies is difficult to find. Many job adverts and application forms are not presented in accessible formats, such as large print and Braille. Additionally, recruitment procedures such as requiring applicants to do written tests can discriminate against blind and partially sighted candidates.

Limited employment related support

Mainstream employment services do not always provide an appropriate service to visually impaired jobseekers. Even people with good qualifications and motivation to find work often need longer term and more intensive support to build confidence and to overcome many of the many barriers they face. Experience with Disability Employment Advisers is variable: from being helpful and supportive to having apparently little knowledge or interest.

Lack of support at the onset of sight loss

Many individuals have to leave work when they develop sight loss due to the absence of a support system that enables them to adjust and learn new ways of working and to continue in employment. It is important to ensure people are given information about employability services when they attend health services such as eye clinics.

Chapter four: Current provision

Workforce Plus, the Scottish Executive's Employability Framework, published in June 2006 focuses on groups more distant from the labour market and what can be done to:

- engage them in employment related support
- assist them to progress towards employment
- help them to sustain employment once it is achieved.

The key operating principles include:

- a focus on early, client centred interventions

- employer engagement
- helping people to sustain employment and progress in employment
- joining up services to provide more holistic approaches
- a focus on better outcomes and achieving targets.

At the same time, the DWP's Welfare Reforms focuses Jobcentre Plus' services more strongly on people on incapacity benefit. There is both an emphasis on reducing the numbers leaving jobs due to health issues and helping those with health issues to leave benefits. The Pathways to Work programme should allow greater flexibility in the benefits system, more locally planned innovative delivery and a greater number of health related interventions.

There is therefore a policy framework in place to potentially improve approaches to this group. However there is a need to overcome a number of problems with current provision.

Overall, the general provision for the jobless on incapacity benefit consist of a set of broad based programmes, which are designed for jobless people with possibly different issues from blind and partially sighted people. There is also some targeted provision, but this is not widely available. Additionally, there is lack of clear evidence about:

- the extent to which they are engaged in the mainstream and the outcomes achieved although it seems clear that there is a need for more outreach to engage the group
- how well the more targeted approaches are doing – there are few 'hard' evaluations of projects targeted at the blind and partially sighted.

Some Good Practice Models

The development of new access technology for *call centres* has increased employment possibilities for people with a visual impairment. There is also a high demand for staff in call centres due to the high turnover of staff.

InterContinental Hotels Group

Working with RNIB and Jobcentre Plus, the Group has provided a recruitment open day, a pre-employment training course, work placements and occasional regular employment.

Improvements needed

Reaching and engaging Blind and partially sighted people form only a very small proportion of the client group in these programmes. Blind people are often a hidden group, hard to reach to engage with. More effort is needed to reach and engage blind and partially sighted people in services and improving capacity to deliver appropriate services. Social work and health service staff, as usually the first point of contact for a person losing their sight, have a key role in identifying people who could benefit from employment related support. However employment is generally not considered by them as an issue.

More effort is needed to improve access to job information for blind and partially sighted people, to increase their job search skills and also to improve access to both the specialist and mainstream services they need. In particular, there is a need to look at how people can be more effectively engaged in employability services when they lose their sight.

Improving delivery There is a need for some specialist provision but also for the mainstream to make far greater commitment to this group. Joint working within the statutory and voluntary sectors needs to be improved to provide a better service to this group. Key areas of support will include raising confidence, assessing capabilities and advising on specialist equipment that might be available, developing job search skills and access to training.

Working with employers is perhaps more important for this group than for any other group of disadvantaged people because of the formidable barriers created by employers' negative perceptions.

Access technology and support programmes are necessary, but not sufficient to convince all employers they can offer a post to a visually impaired person. There is a need for initiatives to change employer attitudes and for mainstream agencies to work with employers to better make the case for employing blind people.

The voluntary sector could play a key role here, helping to prepare people before approaching potential employers and providing aftercare support once the person is in work. Employers also need to be more aware of their social responsibility and they could be better informed about legislation and financial and other support.

Setting targets

Setting targets can help drive behaviour and stimulate change. RNIB Scotland has now set a number of employability targets. These are:

- to assist 460 people with significant loss into work by 2009
- to help 300 people retain their job each year
- to assist 700 people to train in new technology each year.

Key messages

- Although there is a range of employment provision available to assist blind and partially sighted people move into work, visually impaired people form only a very small proportion of clients in these programmes.
- Barriers to employment include negative employer attitudes, lack of awareness among employers about the range of support available to assist blind and partially sighted people, the costs of access technology and adjustments, inaccessible recruitment and selection procedures, poor access to employment services and lack of support at the onset of sight loss.
- Employers' attitudes to employing blind and partially sighted may be affected by their lack of awareness of the range of support available to assist them to employ a blind or partially sighted person.
- While some of these barriers are shared by other disadvantaged groups who are among the long term unemployed, several of them are different and will require different kinds of support mechanisms to assist blind and partially sighted people to move into employment.
- More joint work between statutory and the voluntary sector is needed to address the range of needs that blind and partially sighted people returning to work. Key areas of support include raising confidence building, assessing capabilities, advising on specialist equipment, developing job search skills and access to training. People who are blind and partially sighted can lose confidence and a range of the softer skills which are important in the labour market.
- There is a need for improved access to job information for blind and partially sighted people, to increase their job search skills and to improve access to both the specialist and mainstream services. In particular, there is a need to look at how people can be more effectively engaged in employability services when they lose their sight.
- Providers need to help and support employers, and employers encouraged to be more proactive about employing this group.

Chapter five: conclusions and implications

Drawing together evidence from a range of sources indicates that an effective service for this group needs to

- Serve two customers – jobless people and employers. The service must help unemployed people to develop the skills and experience they need to access employment, but there is also a need to work with employers to deliver the support they need to offer vacancies and, importantly help people to retain employment.
- Provide an holistic service for the jobless client. It is important that the service offers a tailored service to tackle the particular barriers to work the individual faces. An holistic service is also needed because it is likely they will face a number of these barriers.
- Incorporate services which help clients develop soft skills and raise confidence. The importance of these skills in the current labour market has been well documented and helping people to develop these will be at least as important as helping them to develop the specific vocational skills they need.
- Provide a key worker to help clients through services. Progression into the labour market may require a number of steps and access to a range of services. A key worker, who can provide consistent support and help to negotiate the network of support services is likely to make an important contribution to sustaining progression along any vocational pathway.
- Have good referral links to other services. Related to the previous point about the need to access a range of support, an effective service cannot work in isolation and must maintain good links with other sources of potential support including mainstream and voluntary sector organisations.
- Provide in – work support. Given the nature of the barriers blind and partially sighted people face, it may take time for them to settle into employment. Therefore, an effective service needs to continue support into employment. This should include support for employers to help them to offer appropriate support to ensure that the transition into employment is as smooth as possible.

Looking forward

1. Although Workforce Plus identifies a framework for improving the employability of disabled people, this comes with an increased emphasis on positive outcomes, meaning numbers into jobs. Will this increased

focus on jobs disadvantage blind and partially sighted groups and if so what can be done?

2. We have seen that blind and partially sighted people do not represent a big proportion of clients in employability provision. Do training providers and employability projects have similar attitudes to this client group as employers? If so, what can be done about this?
3. What needs to happen to engage more blind and partially sighted people in employment initiatives?
4. Although they face some common barriers to employment as the long term unemployed such as length of time out of the labour market, lack of up to date skills, low employability and low confidence, which mainstream employment services are able to deal with, there are some differences which require specialist inputs. There is a need therefore for some consideration of the role of each of these types of services and of the balance between bespoke and generic provision.
5. RNIB Scotland's employment compact is an important initiative and includes targets for helping people into work and training and helping people to sustain employment are suggested. What actions are needed to back this up and ensure that these targets are achieved?
6. There is a need to develop the effort focused on prevention as this is cost effective and in the longer term will offer good value for money. Key areas of activity here are helping people who lose their sight to retain their existing job or retrain into suitable employment quickly. It also involves helping young people to make effective transitions into employment to avoid them becoming economically inactive. Some assessment of existing efforts in each of these areas needs to be carried out to assess effectiveness and where improvements can be made.

Key lessons from Case Studies

- Access to the right information about vacancies and training is key to matching his skills and occupational interests to an appropriate job opening. This requires good sharing of information and so good coordination between key support agencies such as Jobcentre Plus, RNIB and the voluntary sector organisation in touch with people with a visual impairment are essential for effective support.
- Work placements are an effective way for people with sight loss who have been out of the labour market for some time to develop work experience and skills and to build their confidence in the working environment. However, it is important that this takes place in an organisation which is supportive and where staff are committed to offering a good experience.
- Employment advisers can help to match skills and occupational interests to an appropriate job opening. The adviser's interest and enthusiasm is an

important factor in developing belief that employment is possible despite ongoing health problems. Raising people's confidence in this way is an important aspect of service provision.

- People returning to work after a long time out of work may require time to adjust to working again. A supportive environment is needed that allows them to build up their time gradually as they get used to working.
- Access to Work can be a vital intervention for people with a visual impairment, but there are many problems with the way it is implemented.
- People with sight loss can be very isolated and can find it difficult to find the information needed to secure employment.
- People with sight loss can have very little work experience and this can affect their confidence in their ability to find a job.
- Proficiency in access technology can be a vital skill for people with a visual impairment and can build their confidence in their ability to work. However interventions need to take into account that this can take some time to learn.
- Expansion of work experience opportunities like VIP on Air can be a very valuable way of helping people with sight loss develop the work experience and skills they need to secure employment.
- Access technology and the availability of support programmes are necessary, but not sufficient to convince all employers that they can offer a post to a visually impaired person and some initiatives to change employer attitudes are needed.
- People with sight loss can also have family responsibilities which make it very difficult for them to find and secure employment. Increasing opportunities for part-time work and flexible hours can provide options for people in these circumstances.
- Access to Work can be very helpful for people with sight loss but can be very demanding in terms of the paperwork required and the bureaucracy involved.
- Blind and partially sighted people themselves have to be confident and determined to move into work. They can boost their confidence and increase their chances of getting a job by training and obtaining the qualifications needed for their chosen career.
- Employment advisers should be more proactive in helping them to find work – they should be in touch with the blind and partially sighted people more frequently, checking from time to time how they are getting on.

RNIB Scotland

RNIB Scotland is the leading charity working with blind and partially sighted people in Scotland. As a membership organisation we are dedicated to

delivering services our members need and campaigning for their civil and welfare rights. We support children and adults with sight loss to live full and independent lives. For more information visit www.rnib.org.uk/scotland

Appendix 1: Current provision in detail

People of working age with a visual impairment can be assisted in a range of ways including:

- mainstream employability programmes run by Jobcentre Plus, Scottish Enterprise, Careers Scotland, local development companies and local authorities
- programmes for disabled people in general
- targeted support services specifically for blind and partially sighted people.

(a) Mainstream programmes

The New Deal

This is the main UK programme to assist unemployed people back into work. It is designed to offer unemployed people skills training and a period of work experience along with support and guidance from Personal Advisers. The main New Deal programmes, the New Deal 18-24 and the New Deal 25+ target the long term unemployed on Job Seekers Allowance (JSA). It is likely that most unemployed people who are blind or partially sighted will be on inactive benefits so would be unlikely to join the New Deal although they could access the services if they register for JSA.

Training for Work

This is managed and delivered by local enterprise companies, with referrals to the programme routed through Jobcentre Plus. It aims to help unemployed adults to access sustained employment by gaining occupational skills and qualifications that can also be used in self employment. It could also be used to assist people to retrain following sight loss and to help blind and partially sighted people to develop skills. TfW also has the potential to provide progression for people emerging from pre-employment and basic skills courses. A number of schemes are available, varying in structure and length. Most involve work- based training through placements and an off-the-job element. Few clients with sight loss however appear to receive TfW, and providers may need incentives to target this group.

Pathways to Work

This is a programme to help people on incapacity benefit move back into work by:

- offering greater support when people make a claim to focus on what they can do through specialist personal advisers who will arrange a Personal Capability Assessment
- accessing assistance to overcome any barriers to employment, for example using the New Deal for Disabled People (NDDP), or self-management programmes
- improving financial incentives to move from benefits to work
- offering better support for people with health problems on Job Seekers' Allowance

There are now over 30 Pathways to Work pilots operating across the UK. Pathways to Work clearly has the potential to assist blind and partially sighted people to move into work. However, at present people who are registered blind are exempt from Personal Capability Assessments because it is assumed that their condition will severely reduce their capabilities. This will change however because assessment will be conducted on individuals, based on their capabilities for work. I

(b) Programmes for disabled people

Jobcentre Plus provides a range of specialist services to help disabled people, including people with visual impairments, to gain employment:

- *New Deal for Disabled People* is a voluntary job brokerage programme for people on disability or health related benefits who want to work. It is delivered through a network of Job Brokers experienced in working with people with health conditions or disabilities.
- *Access to Work* provides disabled people and employers with advice and information which can help people take up an offer of a job. A range of assistance is available including grants towards any extra employment costs that result from a person's disability.
- *WORKSTEP* provides supported job opportunities to disabled people who face more complex barriers to getting and keeping a job, but who can work effectively with the right support. The scheme enables eligible disabled people to realise their full potential to work within a commercial environment, giving them an opportunity to progress into open employment, whenever possible.
- *Work Preparation* is designed to help people with a disability return to work after a long period of sickness or unemployment. It can also help people who are at risk of losing their job due to a disability by helping them to overcome difficulties that are affecting their work. The types of support provided under the scheme include help to identify the type of work most

suitable for the individual, work experience in a work environment, learning new skills or updating old skills and confidence building.

- *The Job Introduction Scheme* provides support when a disabled person is about to start a job and there are genuine concerns about his/her ability to manage the particular job because of the disability. Under the scheme, a weekly grant is paid to the employer for the first few weeks of employment to help towards wages or other employment costs, such as additional training.
- *Employment Assessment* helps a person find out how his/her disability or health condition affects the type of work or training they want to do. It can also help the individual identify his/her abilities and strengths. At the end of an assessment, an action plan of the steps needed to achieve job goal of the individual is provided.
- *Specialist Advisers (e.g. Disability Employment Advisers)* are available to advise and support disabled people on a range of issues affecting their ability to obtain employment, retain a job or develop in employment.

Access to Work has good take up among blind and partially sighted people. Although blind and partially sighted people represent only 1.9 per cent of all disabilities within the UK general population

- about 30 per cent of Access to Work users are blind or partially sighted
- 63 per cent of Access to Work users with sight difficulties receive at least two elements of Access to Work support compared to 52 per cent of users with a hearing impairment and 41 per cent of users with a musculo-skeletal problems.

The scheme is particularly important in enabling unemployed blind and partially sighted people to find paid work and help people who had lost their sight to retain employment. For example newly employed blind and partially sighted individuals often say they could not have accepted employment without the Fares to Work element of Access to Work.

Employers are also positive about Access to Work, perceiving it can increase productivity as it enables users to become more confident and effective in their work.

In Supported employment, the employee is typically assigned a job coach to provide job training and other support. Employers must be willing to devote both time and resources to ensuring people are supported. Programmes are delivered by a range of providers including local authorities and the voluntary sector. Very few people with visual impairment are in supported employment programmes.

Social firms or social enterprises are commercial businesses developed to provide employment opportunities for people with a disability or other disadvantage. Although commercial, they can provide a supportive environment for people with disabilities. Supported employment is not used extensively by blind and partially sighted people.

(c) Services specifically for blind and partially sighted people

The main provider of support for blind and partially sighted people in Scotland is RNIB, which aims to develop an employment pathway for people with sight loss through a range of services, often delivered in partnership with other providers, including mainstream employment services.

RSBi – Royal Strathclyde Blindcraft Industries

This social enterprise is a manufacturing company specialising in the design, manufacture and fabrication of products for building exteriors and interiors. Funding sources include Glasgow City Council, Workstep and trading income. RSBi employs 160 people, 115 of whom have a disability. Although there is a focus on people with visual impairment employees have a range of disabilities. There is a Learning Centre on site which provides a range of tutored and self-study courses in both vocational and academic subjects to improve literacy, numeracy and IT skills. The aim is for employees to progress to jobs in the council or elsewhere, but many prefer the job, environment and terms and conditions at RSBi.

RNIB Scotland Employment and Learning Centre

This is a partnership with Jewel and Esk Valley College in Edinburgh. It aims to help blind and partially sighted people in Scotland and the North of England develop the skills, qualifications and confidence to enable them to remain in work or to obtain employment. Part of its aim is to facilitate access to learning opportunities across the UK.

RNIB Scotland Access to Opportunity Centre

This is based at the Scottish Power Learning Centre in Glasgow. It provides facilities and expertise to provide blind people with learning opportunities and to improve their employability with the help of technology and by improving their IT and foreign language skills. Users are also helped to improve their job search skills. In 2006 the centre worked with 103 blind and partially sighted people, 27 of whom were looking for work - a third of whom found employment. An important success factor is the way that the centre boosts confidence and self-esteem.