

# **Cross-Party Group on Visual Impairment**

**Wednesday 5 October 2022, 13.00-14.00**

**AGM and meeting held via Teams**

## **Minute**

## **Present**

### **MSPs**

1. Stuart McMillan MSP
2. Colin Smyth MSP

### **Invited guests**

1. James Adams, Director, RNIB Scotland [CPGVI member/speaker]
2. Lesley Clarke, Disability Services, Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) [speaker]
3. Matthew Innes, Disability Services, DWP [speaker]
4. Melanie Hanvey [speaker]

### **Observers**

1. Kevin Alibone, DWP
2. Steve Brown, Roche Products Ltd
3. Gillian Heavie, Scottish Government
4. Karen Mowat, Scottish Government
5. Lee Shennan, Scottish Government
6. Susan Shippey, Scottish Government
7. Mike Stewart, Scottish Government
8. Lesley-Anne Watt, Scottish Government

### **Non-MSP Group Members**

1. Paul Bartley, Optelec
2. Ian Brown, RNIB Scotland
3. Catriona Burness, RNIB Scotland
4. Bruce Christie, RNIB Scotland Advisory Group
5. Elizabeth Docherty, Optometry Scotland

6. Niall Foley, Guide Dogs Scotland
7. Claire Forde, RNIB Scotland Advisory Group
8. Amanda Foster
9. Laura Gray, Macular Society
10. Sheila Hands, NHS Tayside (Equality and Diversity)
11. Rory Hannon, Family Fund
12. Kirstie Henderson, RNIB Scotland
13. Colin Hilditch, Sight Scotland
14. Thelma Ingram
15. Natasha Johnston, Visibility
16. Jo MacQueen, RNIB Scotland
17. Maureen McAllister
18. Fiona McDonald, Sight Scotland, and Sight Scotland Veterans
19. Hazel McFarlane, Scottish Sensory Hub
20. Iona McLean, Macular Society
21. Carla Marchbank, NESS
22. Philippa Mason, Glaucoma UK
23. Gillian Mitchell, Sight Action
24. Mike Moore, Guide Dogs Scotland
25. Sally Paterson, Vision Support Service, Aberdeen City Council
26. Amira Petrescu, Police Scotland
27. Nicoletta Primo, Sight Scotland and Sight Scotland Veterans
28. Ken Reid
29. Allan Russell, RNIB Connect Radio
30. Alan Stewart
31. Craig Spalding, Sight Scotland, and Sight Scotland Veterans
32. Mhairi Thurston, VI Charity Sector Partnership Mental Health Committee
33. Laura Walker, Visibility Scotland
34. Colette Walker
35. Sandra Wilson
36. Jacquie Winning, Forth Valley Sensory Centre

## **Apologies**

1. Salena Begley, Family Fund
2. Neil Bibby MSP
3. Miles Briggs MSP
4. Matthew Clark
5. Eileen Clarkson, RNIB Scotland
6. Gillian Hallard, RNIB Scotland

7. Margaret Jackson, RNIB Scotland
8. Lisa Kelly, Scottish Association of Visual Impairment Educators
9. Ann MacLean
10. Maureen MacMillan, Sight Action
11. Councillor Robert Mooney
12. Rod Murchison
13. Paul O’Kane MSP
14. Hussein Patwa
15. Mary Rasmussen
16. Professor John Ravenscroft, Scottish Sensory Centre,  
University of Edinburgh
17. Terry Robinson
18. Kirin Saeed
19. Danny Sweeney, North Ayrshire Council
20. Cirta Tooth, NHS Lothian

## **Agenda item 1 - Welcome, introductions and apologies**

Stuart McMillan MSP welcomed everyone to the meeting. Introductions and apologies were acknowledged, and the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) statement was read. Individuals attending who don't want to be named in minutes should let the Secretary know.

## **Agenda item 2 - Employment**

The speakers were Lesley Clarke and Matthew Innes of Disability Services, Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) whilst Melanie Hanvey shared her personal experiences of working with sight loss.

### **2.1. Speakers: Lesley Clarke and Matthew Innes, Disability Services, DWP**

Lesley Clarke and Matthew Innes gave a joint presentation about DWP's Access to Work scheme.

Some key points from this include:

- Access to Work was founded in 1994 and supports around 43,000 customers every year in England, Scotland, and Wales.
- It provides funding to help disabled people, and people with long term health conditions, to gain and sustain paid employment.
- Employers have a duty to provide reasonable adjustments in the workplace for disabled employees.

- Access to Work can assess and help towards costs of adjustments. Some examples might be:
  - BSL interpreters, lip speakers or note takers.
  - adaptations to your vehicle so you can get to work.
  - Taxi fares to work or a support worker if you cannot use public transport.
  - A support worker or job coach to help you in your workplace
- Your workplace can include your home if you work from there some or all the time.
- It does not matter how much you earn. If you get an Access to Work grant, it will not affect any other benefits you get and you will not have to pay it back.

Key discussion points included:

- Access to Work assessors can recommend adaptations after conducting an assessment. This can help the customer with sourcing quotes to obtain necessary adaptations.
- Access to Work may be able to assist with start-up costs, for people who want to become self-employed; however, an assessment will be done on how viable business is.
- Other support includes communication support at interview; support during work placements where there is a real prospect of a paid job and apprenticeships.
- The scheme can't pay for help for people doing voluntary work (unpaid).
- Assessment periods last up to three years before a renewal is required.

## **2.2. Speaker: Mel Hanvey**

Mel shared her experience of using Access to Work for support after she was diagnosed with an eye condition resulting in sight loss. She spoke of the personal barriers she has faced as a visually impaired person in the workplace, and how certain practices can still exclude visually impaired people e.g., compatibility of IT systems with accessible software and as well as general lack of awareness of co-workers about accessible formats.

She also referred to another person's experience, who, whilst receiving Access to Work support, was relocated to a new workplace after internal restructuring. This resulted in longer and more difficult commutes.

Several areas were covered in discussion:

It was remarked that it would help if Access to Work could purchase aids and equipment on a customer's behalf, rather than the customer sourcing three separate quotes. Access to Work no longer have an arrangement where they purchase equipment, aids, etc on the customers behalf, although their assessors can recommend specific aids/equipment, etc.

Access to Work funding helps provide costs for travel and a support worker. However, concerns were expressed around the current processing system which requires paper-based forms to be signed every week/month by employee and employer. This can lead to delays and loss of paperwork and is often being inaccessible to people with sight loss.

There are significant delays when accessing support for the first time on a non-urgent basis (i.e., 20 weeks). This timeframe is reduced for urgent cases, including for people making renewal claims after three years. More staff are being employed by Access to Work to process backlog of claims and assign assessors to cases to deal with the existing delays. A new online digital platform where employees and employers can access and sign off claims is under testing. If successful, it is hoped it will be available later in the year to speed up the process.

Laura Walker, Visibility Scotland, said they can help visually impaired people with recruitment of support workers although there is patchy provision across Scotland. The support worker may have to be employed by the organisation the disabled employee works for, or become a Personal Assistant (PA), if employed directly by disabled employee. This can be challenging if there is no local provision to support disabled employees with recruitment and ongoing support.

Stuart McMillan thanked speakers for their contributions.

## **2.3. Action points**

2.3.1. The Secretary to pass on Mhairi Thurston's details to Access to Work so she can feed in views on how to make the claims process more accessible to people with visual impairment.

2.3.2. Stuart McMillan to follow up with Maureen McAlister about the Access to Work Forum to inform and influence changes with DWP on an ongoing basis.

2.3.3. The Secretary will forward the DWP presentation and contacts to the CPGVI mailing list.

2.3.4. Laura Walker will contact Sarah Marshall of DWP to discuss support available to enable visually impaired people to recruit support workers.

### **Agenda item 3 - AGM and Election of Office Bearers**

Colin Smyth MSP acted as Chair of the AGM to cover the elections. As there has been no other candidates or nominations, the proposals were put forward and agreed:

#### **Convener**

Stuart McMillan MSP to continue in role  
Proposer: Colin Smyth, MSP  
Seconder: Mhairi Thurston

#### **Vice-Convener**

Neil Bibby MSP to continue in role  
Proposer: Colin Smyth, MSP  
Seconder: Alan Stewart.

#### **Secretariat/Treasurer**

Catriona Burness, RNIB Scotland, to continue in role:  
Proposer: Colin Smyth, MSP  
Seconder: Stuart McMillan, MSP

The business of AGM was closed.

### **Agenda item 4 - Approval of minutes of meeting of 10 May 2022**

The minutes of the last meeting were proposed by James Adams and seconded by Thelma Ingram and approved.

### **Agenda item 5 - Matters arising and Action Points report**

5.1. The Freedom of Information (FOI) report, "Traffic lights across Scotland (Spring 2022)" was circulated with the meeting papers. It features responses from 29 Scottish Local Authorities.

Councillor Robert Mooney has been campaigning for Glasgow City Council to undertake traffic light repairs and got contradictory information on the costs of repairs. He is pursuing this at the local level and may later return to the CPGVI about his concerns.

5.2. As agreed at our last meeting, the Secretary wrote to congratulate Councillors Robert Mooney and Cate Vallis on being elected and to wish them success in their tenure. The Secretary also wrote to Hazel McFarlane offering condolences from the CPGVI following the death of her mother.

5.3. Mike Stewart of the Scottish Government provided notes on eyecare reform for the minutes.

5.4. Any other business - cataract waiting times - the Secretary collaborated with Sandra Wilson to draft a letter to Maree Todd MSP, Minister for Public Health, Women's Health, and Sport on the concerns expressed about waiting times for cataract treatment. The reply will be circulated in due course. The Secretary to circulate response to waiting times when the reply becomes available.

5.5. Morven Brooks, Chief Executive, Disability Equality Scotland provided copy of her presentation on Braille Labelling on Food Products. The presentation was circulated to CPGVI members as well as the Parliamentary Question and Answer on mandatory braille labelling tabled by the Convener Stuart McMillan.

## **Agenda item 6 - Cost of Living Crisis**

Speaker: James Adams, Director RNIB Scotland

Everyone is impacted in some way by the current cost of living crisis and many of the decisions to tackle this rest with the UK Government.

Surveys carried out by RNIB have pointed to people experiencing greater hardship in the last six months. Many are going without everyday items such as food, heating, and lighting, whilst others are becoming more isolated at home, as they can no longer afford taxi fares to access shops, services, and amenities.

Whilst most of the economic levers to deal with cost-of-living crisis remain with the UK government, there are steps which the Scottish Parliament could take to improve the situation, particularly for visually impaired people. This includes the visual impairment National

Entitlement Card (NEC) provisions. At present those who hold an NEC card with the eye +1 symbol in Scotland, are entitled to free rail travel. However, provision for companions to travel for free, does not apply on rail travel, as it does on buses within journeys in Scotland.

Sight Scotland are campaigning for free rail travel to be extended to companions of visually impaired NEC card holders. Further information on this was given to the meeting by Nicoletta Primo. The Scottish Household Survey found that people avoid using rail travel due to the costs associated with it, whilst a companion entitlement would enable more people to travel.

During discussion it was suggested that individuals contact their own MSPs if they have any difficulty claiming their entitlement to NEC cards.

## **6.1. Action Points**

### **6.1.1. NEC Cards and +1 Cards**

The Secretary will collaborate with Sight Scotland on drafting a letter to the Scottish Government on behalf of the CPGVI, asking what they can do to increase the uptake of registered people applying and getting NEC cards and to highlight the campaign run by Sight Scotland to provide free +1 companion travel.

### **6.1.2. Cost of living crisis**

The CPGVI to write to the acting Finance Secretary asking what can be done at the Scottish level, including raising the possibility of seeking to apply the pension triple lock to benefits.

## **Agenda item 7 - Any other competent business**

None.

## **Agenda item 8 - Date and time of next meeting**

To be confirmed (TBC).