# Joint statement: Charities call on Government to make benefits and employment support fit for purpose for people with sight loss

As a coalition of sight loss charities, we are calling on the Government to make the benefit system and employment support fit for purpose for blind and partially sighted people.

The Department for Work and Pensions’ (DWPs) long-awaited consultation, Shaping Future Support: Health and Disability Green Paper, presents an important opportunity for the Government to hear from disabled people about their experiences of claiming benefits and receiving employment support. We hope the Government is listening and will be delivering far reaching changes.

For far too long, many blind and partially sighted people have struggled to navigate the benefit system and live within its means. A recent survey carried out by RNIB showed a staggering 43% of people with sight loss thought their own experiences and verbal evidence were not listened to and taken seriously by benefit assessors. If the Government is serious about building trust, we need a better-informed and more compassionate approach to benefits assessments.

We are calling for all decision-making for benefits and support to respect and listen to individuals, giving proper weight to their own evidence, and for assessments to also make best use of pre-existing evidence from experts like healthcare professionals. This is particularly the case in relation to claimants who already have certificates confirming severe sight loss.

We also want to see the eligibility for out of work benefits, determined through the Work Capability Assessment, amended. The inclusion of braille in the wording must be removed as an exclusion from satisfying activity 7 of the Work Capability Assessment. It is our view that braille is generally irrelevant to employment prospects in the real world and it should not be interpreted as an adaptation of communication in the workplace; as employers almost exclusively lack the means to produce information in braille or use it as a means of communication with a braille user.

The potential to learn braille should also never be used as a reason to exclude someone from meeting “the severe and enduring conditions criteria” in the Work Capability Assessment. The result of this exclusion is that blind and partially sighted claimants are forced to endure repeat assessments, when their condition remains the same or worse. The notion that braille could or should be learned by a claimant is wholly unrealistic in most cases.

Overcoming barriers to employment is one of the biggest challenges faced by people with sight loss; with only one in four registered blind and partially sighted people of working age in employment. We are concerned that there is no mention of the Equality Act throughout the Green Paper, especially as recent research showed that 23% of employers said they were not willing to make adaptations to employ someone with a visual impairment despite legal obligations under the Act. The Government needs to place much greater focus on addressing attitudes in the workplace and educating employers to put an end to this shocking situation.

If Jobcentres and Access to Work advisors are to provide expert and personalised support, much better training needs to be provided to those assessing and assisting blind and partially sighted job seekers and employees. A recent survey from RNIB found that over 60% of blind and partially sighted people thought work coaches did not have good knowledge and understanding of sight loss and the support and adjustments they need. We are calling for the DWP to provide regular specialist sight loss training to job centre staff and Access to Work assessors, in order to deliver support that meets all of an individual’s needs.

We also join the call by other disability stakeholders for there to be Disability Employment Taskforces in each region, comprising of people with a diverse range of disabilities and front-line workers.

Although we are pleased to see the Government further commit to closing the disability employment gap in the National Disability Strategy, this must come with action and greater understanding of the needs of people with different conditions. The employment gap for people with sight loss is around double that for other disabled people and is widening. If the Government is going to effectively measure their progress of levelling up economic opportunities, it is vital they collect much more detailed data to break down the overall disability employment gap to ensure no-one is left behind.

There are 80,000 blind and partially sighted people of working age keen to fulfil their potential and it is essential that these Government systems are set up to do this.

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Glaucoma UK

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The Royal National Institute of Blind People

Thomas Pocklington Trust

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