

Vision Foundation response to Shaping future support: the health and disability green paper

October 2021

Summary of Vision Foundation Recommendations

1. We call for increased resources to scale up and deepen (sight loss awareness) training provided to Jobcentre staff, and for people with lived experience to always lead on the training; ensuring it is fully responsive to the nuanced and complex needs of a very diverse community.
2. The Government to use its convening powers to consolidate various disability standards, signposting as relevant to disability or health-specific standards such as the RNIB's Visibly Better Employer to enable an easier journey for employers and visually impaired employees.
3. We join the growing call by disability stakeholders for the Mayor of London to initiate a Disability Employment Taskforce. Comprised of key stakeholders including people with a diverse range of disabilities and frontline workers (local organisations).
4. We would welcome a comprehensive Digital Disability strategy as a guide to the wider sector
5. We encourage the Government to share disaggregated disability data and learning from delivery models to inform and improve sector service provision.

Introduction to the Vision Foundation

The Vision Foundation is the leading grant-maker in London, transforming the lives of people facing or living with sight loss in the capital by funding projects which inform, empower and include. We are committed to our vision where people living with sight loss are equal citizens and preventable blindness is a thing

of the past, working with a mission to make London a shining example of a sight loss aware city.

We work in collaboration with established partners to deliver projects and to campaign for systemic change. We also connect businesses with the front line so that they can contribute meaningfully to their local communities. We are committed to our three strategic aims which we believe will enable us to achieve our vision over the five-year period of our strategy:

- Empower Those At Risk – supporting intersects who may be doubly disadvantaged, such as visually impaired people from the BAME community.
- Prevent Avoidable Blindness, addressing the 50% of UK sight loss which is preventable, but not necessarily treatable.
- Open Society Up, ensuring that visually impaired people have equal access to cultural, social and employment opportunities.

In 2020, we won the DSC Great Giving Award for Social Change in recognition of our outstanding approach to selecting and investing in projects, coupling financial support with capacity building, advocacy and campaigns.

Our Commitment to Inclusive Employment

Since 1921, we have been championing the rights and needs of blind and partially sighted people in London. In celebration of our 100th Birthday this year, and in line with our strategic aims, we launched our See My Skills appeal to address the shockingly low employment rates for blind and partially sighted people in the UK.

There are over two million people living with sight loss in the UK today. Increasing prevalence and worsening outcomes mean that the economic cost of sight loss in the UK is £28 billion – greater than the cost of stroke, heart disease and cancer combined. While sight loss affects people of all ages, risk

increases with age. Nearly two thirds of people living with sight loss are women, with people from black and minority ethnic communities at greater risk of some of the leading causes of sight loss.

Although employment brings financial independence, purpose and identity, we know that blind and partially sighted people face multiple layers of barriers to accessing and retaining decent jobs, based largely on discriminatory perception about their abilities including:

- Only 27% of working age blind or partially sighted people are in work, compared to 51% of disabled people, and 75% of the general population.ⁱ
- 90% of employers state that it would be “difficult” or “impossible” to employ a visually impaired person.ⁱⁱ
- 23% of employers would not be willing to make adaptations to employ a blind or partially sighted person despite Equality Act obligationsⁱⁱⁱ

Our Response to Shaping future support: the health and disability green paper

We welcome the Government’s commitment to ensuring that that disabled people and people with health conditions can lead the most independent lives possible and reach their full potential. Our response is focused on Improving Employment Support (Chapter 2) of the Green Paper, informed by our own research, the [See My Skills Report](#) which was commissioned to better understand the contributing factors to better employment outcomes for blind and partially sighted people.

The Report is informed by findings from a literature review of peer-reviewed academic and professional journals in addition to focus group interviews with visually impaired individuals and sight loss professionals. We have also reflected on reports from

our funded front-line partners, relying heavily on the lived experience of people with sight loss.

We have focused on the following consultation questions, where informed by our funded partners, we believe we have the most relevant and deepest experience, making recommendations which will serve to reduce the disability employment gap:

- What more could we do to further support employers to improve work opportunities for disabled people through Access to Work and Disability Confident?
- How can we make the most of the knowledge and expertise of local organisations to support disabled people and people with health conditions into employment?
- What should we consider when developing a digital support offer for disabled people and people with health conditions?

1. What more could we do to further support employers to improve work opportunities for disabled people through Access to Work and Disability Confident?

Through our research and evidence from our front-line funded partners, we know that Access to Work has played a crucial role in enabling many blind and partially sighted people into work. As the Green Paper highlights, the scheme has been a lifeline for many disabled people. We are encouraged by the strides made by the Government to continually improve the scheme for example through the Access to Work Stakeholder Forum, and by commitments in the National Disability Strategy, to strengthen access to employment, including the development of the Access to Work passport.

However, anecdotally we are told by service users that Access to Work has been quite a challenging experience. Participants in

our recent focus group discussions noted significant concerns about the scheme including a general lack of awareness about what it covers and how to access it. The assessment and application process were seen as onerous with the form ironically inaccessible, preventing blind and partially sighted people from accessing independently.

"There's not enough knowledge about Access to Work at all, outside a very small bubble if you're lucky to know someone who knows the whole process and what the support worker is for."
Simon

"I just find it incredibly strange that in the 21st century you can't send them an application or a claim form by email securely. It has to be signed, and it's not accessible [for] visually impaired people at all." Hazem

Participants also expressed concerns that the scheme does not cover all apprenticeships, voluntary work, or work experience. *"In my experience, most people who have employment with sight loss are either working for a large governmental organization or for a charity or working in local government, or indeed self-employed. In terms of the sort of people working at supermarket, for example, I've yet to see someone with a visual impairment working in that kind of job."* Martin

We appreciate that significant effort has been made by the Government and its partners including the RNIB to train Job Centre staff to better support blind and partially sighted people.

Critically however, participants felt 'written off' with Job Centre Plus staff recommending benefits rather than committing the time needed to support them into employment. Staff were also found to have a limited understanding of visual impairment and the support needed, in addition to a lack of assistive technology in the offices.^{iv}

"It's not that job centre staff want to be unhelpful towards individuals with sight loss. It's quite simply that they do not have the expertise." John

Our See My Skills Report makes the following recommendations for policy makers which we believe will serve to strengthen the experience and impact of Access to Work:

Access to Work needs to be made more accessible:

- Awareness of Access to Work and how to apply should be better promoted to individuals and employers of all sizes. Current awareness is low. For example, only 9 per cent of small businesses - who have the most to gain - use it.
- The application, assessment and claims process should be made more accessible to blind and partially sighted people, in formats that can be completed independently, without sighted assistance.
- The process needs to be speeded up so that individuals are not starting employment without the necessary equipment or support, or out of pocket.
- The eligibility criteria should be broadened to cover all unpaid opportunities including internships, work experience or voluntary work.

Jobcentre Plus provision needs to be improved.

- Staff should receive better training about visual impairment and how to signpost to specialist support.
- Staff need to raise their aspirations for blind and partially sighted job seekers and not assume they will be 'better off' on benefits.
- Jobcentre Plus offices should offer assistive technology.
- Where they exist, generalist disability employment advisers should receive specialist training in visual impairment.

Recommendation 1: We call for increased resources to scale up and deepen (sight loss awareness) training provided to Jobcentre staff, and for people with lived experience to always lead on the training to ensure it is

fully responsive to the nuanced and complex needs of a very diverse community.

Although a valuable step towards more disability inclusive employment, initiatives such as the 'Disability Confident' scheme have also met with criticism because, as a self-certifying scheme, they are seen as a 'tick box' exercise which may not fully reflect discriminatory practices by employers. This is particularly pertinent for visually impaired people, where research has shown that 90% of employers admit that they would find it "difficult" or "impossible" to employ a visually impaired person. It is important to acknowledge that disabilities are not viewed equally.

Even where employers report increased employment of people with disabilities, it is likely that, as highlighted above, some recruiters might be drawn to easier work placements, rather than creating opportunities for people with more complex needs. This is especially pertinent, linking back to Access to Work and in light of the fact that the National Disability Strategy failed to address the annual cap on the number of services which can be accessed under the scheme;^v a clear bias against people with complex disabilities who might require more costly support.

Nonetheless, we appreciate the importance of such standards and the need for employers to voluntarily 'opt in', to nurture ownership and long-term commitment. There is a risk, however, that where time is at a deficit for many employers, and with a growing number of other disability standards, employers will be unable to effectively commitment to multiple schemes. This could potentially limit a transition to 'deeper dive' standards as a next step where employers can be held and hold themselves better accountable for changes in their employment practices.

Recommendation 2: The Government could use its convening powers to consolidate various disability standards, signposting as relevant to disability or health-specific standards such as the RNIB's Visibly Better Employer to enable an easier journey for employers and employees.

2. How can we make the most of the knowledge and expertise of local organisations to support disabled people and people with health conditions into employment?

Local organisations have a critical role to play in effecting an improved disability inclusive landscape. We saw during the pandemic that some of the local organisations we fund became first responders, providing vital services whilst several larger service providers paused, locked in strategizing.

During the first lockdown, blind and partially sighted people faced significant challenges, including delays in accessing appropriate technology and software to work from home, in addition to losing the support of their sighted assistants. All of which led to a greater loss of independence and increased stress, only mitigated by the support provided by local sight loss organisations.

They are a crucial part of the referral pathway for visually impaired people, especially those who experience sight loss at a later stage in life, facilitating access to eye health care and employment support services, mitigating risks against loss of confidence and job loss.

From our funded partners, we have learnt that access to employment for blind and partially sighted people is not just about assessing their ability or capacity to find and retain a job. It is crucial to adopt a whole-life approach to get a fuller understanding of all aspects of life as a person with a visual impairment, to identify risk factors which might affect access to decent jobs.

They work closely with people with lived experience to identify the most appropriate metrics for tracking improvements to life experience. For example, our funded partners have highlighted

to us that it is equally important to measure the steps to employment in addition to the success of securing a job.

The development of any employment scheme (including digital solutions) would need to be fully informed by lived experience. Local sight loss organisations have a suite of tried and tested models which could be shared in a more systematic way to inform the Government's approach.

Our See My Skills Report also flagged the critical impact of mentoring for people with a visual impairment, a vital service which several sight loss organisations provide.

Ultimately, local organisations are closer placed within communities, and are well positioned to play an intermediary and advisory role; working with Government, employers and other stakeholders to identify and address potential intersectional barriers such as the impact of gender, race, income, the type and level of support required. Ultimately, this will drive to improve knowledge of visual impairment to overcome negative attitudes.

Recommendation 3: We join the growing call by disability stakeholders for the Mayor of London to initiate a Disability Employment Taskforce. Comprised of key stakeholders including people with a diverse range of disabilities and frontline workers (local organisations).

3. What should we consider when developing a digital support offer for disabled people and people with health conditions?

We believe that any digital offer requires 2 key considerations:

- a) Person-centred approach

***"I need specialised assistance I guess, in some ways you could say I would need more of a person-centred plan than your average jobseeker would."* Zainab**

We welcome the commitment in the National Disability Strategy to digitalise Access to Work processes which would mitigate current accessibility challenges.

Any digital solution requires a person-centred approach to ensure full accessibility for a diverse range of disabilities. Our interviews with people with lived experience serve to validate 'Marie's' experience as highlighted in one of the case studies in the Green Paper, which gives great value to nuanced support as a great enabler to employment.

A person-centred approach facilitates co-creation between disabled people, service providers and digital innovators, bringing greater understanding of issues faced by service users from their perspective.

Leadership by people with lived experience also presents the opportunity to assess other key considerations including, the need for ongoing IT training depending on skillset, affordability and even the awareness of initiatives such as Access to Work's support with assistive technology.

Overall, this approach drives a more thoughtful and better integrated service, with appropriate digital platforms which are fit for purpose and tested across a range of disabilities to ensure full accessibility.

b) Disability Digital Strategy

The Covid-19 pandemic has served to accelerate transition to a more digital world which risks leaving visually impaired people further behind.

Recommendation 4: Digital solutions interact with almost all aspects of life so we would call on the Government to consolidate its approach into one comprehensive disability digital strategy to guide the wider sector in its own journey towards accessible digitalization.

Addendum

In addition to responding directly to some of the key consultation questions above, we are keen to highlight the importance of disaggregated disability data in building a more resilient disability sector:

Disaggregated data and shared learning

There has been a significant focus on health and disability over recent years, in particular, working to better understand how to build a more inclusive and equitable society.

We see great value in the Health Model offices as outlined in the Green Paper and would urge the Government to also consolidate and publish key lessons from this pilot, including disaggregated data on the number of disabled people who have been placed into employment, the type of disability and work done with employers, to provide more nuanced analyses about the key barriers and enablers to employment.

Our research found that there is a dearth of tangible evidence of 'what works', especially on initiatives supporting blind and partially sighted people into employment. Such learning will be critical in informing improvements in policy and practice.

The wider disability sector could also benefit significantly from having a better understanding of the Government's own journey in inclusive employment, outlining the successes and challenges to date of employing people with disabilities across various departments, thereby taking the sector on a journey.

This would also provide an opportunity for the Government to consolidate and share progress towards implementing recommendations from the various previous consultations on disability, for example the Work and Pensions Select Committee into Assistive Technology. The Government's leadership in this area will encourage an environment of learning and sharing resulting in greater positive gains in the longer term.

End paper

ⁱ Slade, Edwards and White (2017). Employment status and sight loss. RNIB

ⁱⁱ and ⁱⁱⁱ Roberts, S, C Heaver, K Hill, J Rennison, B Stafford, N Howat, G Kelly, S Krishnan, P Tapp and Thomas (2004), Disability in the Workplace: Employers' and Service Providers' responses to the Disability Discrimination Act in 2003 and preparation for 2004 changes, DWP, report No 2002

^{iv} Vision Foundation, See My Skills Report (July 2021): <https://www.visionfoundation.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/See-My-Skills-Report.pdf>

^v [DisabilityCharitiesConsortiumManifestoForTheNationalDisabilityStrategyJan2021.pdf \(rnid.org.uk\)](#)