

Inquiry into Assisting Young People into Work: RNIB Cymru response

1. About RNIB Cymru

1.1. RNIB Cymru is Wales' largest sight loss charity. We provide support, advice and information to people living with sight loss across Wales, as well as campaigning for improvements to services and raising awareness of the issues facing blind and partially sighted people. RNIB Cymru welcomes the opportunity to respond to this inquiry, and would be happy to present evidence to the Committee.

2. About sight loss

2.1. There are 100,000 people living with sight loss in Wales. This is predicted to double by 2050 (1). It is estimated that there are 1,935 children and young people aged 0-25 with a visual impairment in Wales. At least 20 per cent of these will have additional disabilities and/or special educational needs; a further 30 per cent have very complex needs (2).

2.2. Only about a third of people with a visual impairment are in employment, a lower proportion than disabled people as whole (3). Blind and partially sighted people are nearly five times more likely than the general population to have had no paid work for five years (4). A person with a visual impairment who has a degree has only the same likelihood of being employed as a non-disabled person with no qualifications (5).

2.3. For someone with a visual impairment, barriers to finding work include:

- discrimination by the majority of employers – one DWP study found that nine out of ten employers rated blind and partially sighted people as 'difficult' or 'impossible' to employ (6);
- a lack of awareness of help available (for example, Access to Work) by both employers and people with a visual impairment;
- lack of access to accessible computers for the purpose of job searching.

2.4. RNIB Cymru's experience is that a key barrier faced by blind and partially sighted people is the increasing reliance on web-based advertisement of opportunities and online recruitment processes which are inaccessible to people with sight loss. Many websites are not compatible with the accessibility software that people with sight loss use (for example, screen magnification or screen readers). As a result, often one to one support is essential in assisting people to locate job opportunities and apply for them. This key stumbling block means that many visually impaired jobseekers simply don't get past the first hurdle.

2.5. Factors that determine a blind or partially sighted person's distance from the labour market and whether they are ready for work include:

- having the skills and confidence to communicate their needs and associated workplace adjustments to employers in a positive way;
- confidence and competence using computers adapted with appropriate assistive technology and software;
- confidence and ability to travel independently using public transport;
- access to information via their preferred format (eg braille, large print, audio or electronic information);
- social and independence skills – young people with sight loss may not be able to access the visual cues (such as body language) of social interaction, so may need support to develop these skills. (7)

2.6. For those people who begin to lose their sight, or whose sight deteriorates while they are still in employment, this can trigger exit from the workforce: 27 per cent of registered blind and partially

sighted people report that the main reason for leaving their last job was the onset of sight loss or deterioration of their sight (8).

3. Barriers to work for blind and partially sighted young people

3.1. Barriers to work can be even more intense for young people with sight loss, who have little or no previous work experience and who may lack confidence in advocating their needs to employers or have low aspirations about work. This makes finding work an extremely difficult path, especially in a tough economic climate.

3.2. Research shows that young blind and partially sighted people face multiple barriers to making a successful transition to adulthood, including in accessing employment. A survey carried out by Action for Blind People in 2011 found that the major concerns of blind and partially sighted young people aged 14 to 25 were independent travel/transport (by 51% of respondents), a lack of social life/friends (47%), employment (22%) and independent living skills (22%). The survey results also suggest that young people with a visual impairment are less likely than their peers to have experience of paid employment (9).

3.3. Previous projects run in Wales have identified that post-16 is a key vulnerable period for blind and partially sighted young people, primarily because support networks at school and home do not transfer with a young person wishing to move on to college, training, employment or independent living (10). This makes timely and appropriate support to young people with sight loss particularly important in their transition into adulthood.

3.4. Work experience is a valuable way of gaining “real world” experience and can be a stepping stone to employment. However, RNIB research has identified a number of barriers to effective work experience placements for blind and partially sighted young people, including:

- a lack of opportunities for worthwhile placements, which may be due to the reluctance of employers to accommodate a young person with sight loss;
- underdeveloped confidence and social skills in the young people themselves;

- restrictions on independent travel/mobility both to and around the work placement location;
- a lack of support and accessible technology for use in the workplace. (11)

3.5. Qualified Teachers of Children with Visual Impairments across Welsh schools have also highlighted to RNIB Cymru that the transition into the workplace for blind and partially sighted young people is not always smooth. Work experience placements are seen to be "notoriously difficult" as they are often arranged through the school and sometimes on short timescales. The support of mobility training for young people in the work place as well as the opportunity to loan equipment whilst on work experience were recognised as key enablers that if available, would "help them enormously".

3.6. While there are a range of schemes available to support young people into work, RNIB Cymru hears that:

- young people with visual impairments have difficulty in getting information about the schemes available, including Access to Work and other support mechanisms;
- scheme providers need training on the needs of young people with sight loss, such as how to engage with them, interview them and support them successfully.

3.7. Due to these barriers, very few people with visual impairment are accessing schemes – for example, we know of only 3-4 people with sight loss who have been placed via Jobs Growth Wales, and these are individuals whom RNIB Cymru have placed.

3.8. Mobility and independent travel skills are key to blind and partially sighted young people's ability to access employment opportunities. As they are unable to drive, they are reliant on public transport or taxis, or assistance from family and friends to get around. In rural areas, in particular, this may limit their ability to find and access work. Where it is available, travelling independently by public transport requires confidence and resilience – the problems encountered in doing so is one of the most frequent issues raised by RNIB Cymru's members.

4. Assisting young people with sight loss to enter employment

4.1. RNIB Cymru's Future In-Sight project, funded by the Big Lottery, was developed to meet the support needs of 14-25 year olds with sight loss. The project aims to develop their life skills, provide access to supported work experience placements and support them in planning for their future, including advice and assistance in applying for employment or further/higher education.

4.2. The Future Insight project provides individual careers advice to give young people an idea of what is possible for them, with their individual sight loss, to do. It also engages with employers across Wales to offer relevant, stimulating work placements and provides free visual awareness training for employers, mobility training for beneficiaries whilst on work experience and a bank of specialist access technology equipment available for loan.

4.3. However, we would stress that work experience placements are only effective when individuals have the personal confidence and the prerequisite "soft" skills before undertaking work experience placements. For this reason, the Future Insight project also works with young blind and partially sighted people to improve their social skills and emotional strength and resilience.

4.4. The early outcomes from the Future In-Sight programme demonstrate that where a work placement is properly supported, it can lead to paid employment and meaningful occupation. Of the 12 young people that RNIB Cymru have found placements for this year, 3 have gone on to paid employment with their host employers, and 5 have continued to volunteer there. It is clear that with the right support young people with sight loss can engage with the world of work and succeed there. This must be a key part of any schemes to assist young people with sight loss to enter the labour market.

5. Further information

5.1. We hope that you have found these comments useful. For further information, please contact:

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6. References

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