

Supporting someone with sight loss to find or stay in work: a guide for employment professionals

Content

Supporting someone with sight loss to find or stay in work: a guide for employment professionals	1
Content.....	1
1. Introduction.....	2
2. What this guide is for.....	3
3. The facts.....	3
4. What does the law say?	4
5. What does good employment support look like?	4
6. Access to Work	6
7. Work-based assessments	7
8. RNIB guide for employers	7
9. Visual awareness training	7
10. The role of technology	8
11. Mobility training and independent living skills	8
12. Sightline: a UK-wide database of service providers	9
13. The role of the assessment	9
14. Job clubs and job brokerage	10
15. Job search toolkit.....	11
16. Pre-employment training	11
17. Residential training	11
18. Inclusive apprenticeships	12
19. Social enterprises.....	12
20. In-work benefits check.....	12
21. Information and advice via RNIB factsheets and website ...	13
22. RNIB services.....	14
23. Increasing your knowledge further	16
24. Further information and resources	17

1. Introduction

If you are involved in supporting blind and partially sighted jobseekers, RNIB and Action for Blind People can help you to work effectively with your clients. At RNIB, we work alongside employment professionals to deliver specialist solutions, and have developed tools to help blind and partially sighted people find, and remain in, work.

2. What this guide is for

This guide outlines a portfolio of employment support services for blind and partially sighted people. We want to equip you with the knowledge, tools and confidence to be there for working age people with sight loss, who are seeking to find or stay in work, and to ensure specialist provision is offered to all blind and partially sighted people on any employment support programme.

3. The facts

There are just over 84,000 registered blind and partially sighted people of working age in the UK.

However, only one in four of those are in paid employment, and this number is falling. There has been a significant decrease in the proportion of registered blind and partially sighted people of working age in any form of employment over the last decade, from one in three in 2005, to around one in four in 2015. This compares with around three quarters of the UK general population being in work.

This figure is even worse for people who are completely blind. Only around one in 10 people of working age with poor functional vision is in paid employment.

Those with a degree or higher qualification only have the same chance of getting a job as someone with no qualifications in the general population.

Sight loss is a major factor in why some people give up their jobs. Yet 30 per cent of registered blind and partially sighted people who were not in work, but who had worked in the past, said that they maybe or definitely could have continued in their job given the right support.

3.1 What work can blind and partially sighted people do?

Blind and partially sighted people can do almost any job.

People with sight loss succeed in a wide variety of jobs across almost all employment sectors. Apart from obvious roles such as piloting a plane or driving a car, a blind or partially sighted person can do just about any kind of work. Just like everyone else, it comes down to whether they have the training, skills and experience. There are blind and partially sighted secretaries, car mechanics, nurses, scientists, stockbrokers, MPs, journalists, web designers and teachers. Just like any other worker, they will need the right tools to do the job – in this case additional tools that reduce or eliminate the need for eyesight.

- RNIB has published a report into the types of jobs blind and partially sighted people do, showing their range and extent, and highlighting individual roles as well as broader employment trends. This report is available to download from RNIB's website at:

www.rnib.org.uk/employmentresearch

- RNIB also publishes a series of booklets called This IS Working, which highlights the successful careers of a wide cross section of blind and partially sighted people throughout the UK. They are available alongside many other success stories on RNIB's website at:

www.rnib.org.uk/employmentstories

4. What does the law say?

Sight loss is considered a disability under equality law. Employers are not allowed to discriminate against someone on the basis of their disability. For someone experiencing sight loss, this means that it is unlawful to dismiss someone on the grounds of disability, and places a duty on employers to make reasonable adjustments in the workplace to accommodate a person's specific needs. More information is available on RNIB's website at:

www.rnib.org.uk/rights

5. What does good employment support look like?

Those looking for work need specialist support on their journey towards employment. In addition to barriers common with anyone

out of work for a long period, blind and partially sighted jobseekers have specific needs related to their sight loss. Most are a long way from the labour market, and require a more specialised, resource-intensive model of support.

The key message for anyone in work who is losing their sight, is that **sight loss should not equal job loss**. People in work should be supported and encouraged to stay in work whenever possible, and they should be provided with the right information, advice, equipment and support to help them retain work, and progress in their careers.

We believe that blind or partially sighted people should not be excluded from employment; nor should sight loss equal job loss.

5.1 What you need to know to support blind and partially sighted people

You can ensure that you know how to signpost blind and partially sighted people to specialist support services, as necessary.

Key areas of specialist support typically include:

- training to develop assistive technology skills
- development of mobility skills and making the most of residual vision
- developing the confidence to communicate sight-specific needs and reasonable adjustments to employers
- pre-employment training programmes to meet the complex needs of blind and partially sighted people
- accessing peer support
- a work-based assessment that is holistic and person-centred
- clear, practical advice on reasonable adjustments at work
- promoting awareness of the Access to Work scheme
- knowledge of the business benefit of employing and / or retaining disabled employees.

One-to-one support and case management is also important for anyone requiring long term support towards gaining employment or with retaining their job. Indeed, establishing and keeping a point

of contact is critical when referring to other organisations offering specialist support services such as training programmes, Access to Work, etc.

These areas are described in more detail in the sections that follow.

5.2 How we can help

RNIB and Action for Blind People are able to assist you to deliver employment services to people with sight loss. We have expert employment advisors with the appropriate skills and tools in working with blind and partially sighted jobseekers.

We also provide direct employment support services for blind and partially sighted jobseekers via our network of regional and local service delivery teams.

Services are also available to employers, external organisations and intermediaries. For example, we conduct assessments on behalf of Access to Work, as well as independently commissioned work-based assessments. Contact the Action Employment Line or RNIB helpline for more information.

RNIB helpline:

- 0303 123 9999
- helpline@rnib.org.uk

Action Employment Line:

- 0800 440 2255
- employmentline@actionforblindpeople.org.uk

6. Access to Work

The Government's Access to Work (ATW) scheme provides practical and financial support for disabled people in work and those who are starting a new job. It awards discretionary grants towards any extra employment costs that result from a disability, including special aids and equipment, support workers and travel to work. Support workers in particular can play a vital role in helping blind and partially sighted people to stay in work. RNIB has

produced a factsheet on ATW, and information is available on GOV.UK at:

www.gov.uk/access-to-work

7. Work-based assessments

Central to helping anyone with sight loss, who is starting work or aiming to keep their job, is a work-based assessment. This should be carried out before a blind or partially sighted person starts work, or when an existing employee begins to lose their sight. This typically involves a visit to the workplace by a specialist, who will recommend equipment, software, and adjustments that would allow the employee to fulfil their role more effectively.

Assessments are normally provided free of charge by Access to Work, but can be directly commissioned by an employer from a specialist provider such as RNIB. Any subsequent costs for equipment can often be paid for through the Access to Work scheme. More information is available on RNIB's website at: www.rnib.org.uk/employmentassessments

8. RNIB guide for employers

Employers may have concerns about taking on someone with sight loss, or about an existing employee who is losing their sight. This guide has been designed to address those concerns and sets out the benefits of employing a blind or partially sighted person.

Advances in technology mean that blind and partially sighted people can overcome many of the barriers they have faced at work in the past, while grant schemes such as Access to Work mean that many of the costs can be met by the government. This guide can be downloaded at:

www.rnib.org.uk/employingsomeone

9. Visual awareness training

Visual awareness training provides a comprehensive overview of how sight loss can affect individuals. It offers practical advice and guidance on how to support blind and partially sighted employees. The training aims to build participants' confidence in working with colleagues, staff and customers with sight loss. Training could be

paid for through the Access to Work scheme. For more information visit:

www.rnib.org.uk/servicesforemployers

10. The role of technology

Access technology enables blind and partially sighted people to take more control over their work, and to participate in jobs that they may otherwise be excluded from. The use of a computer installed with appropriate access technology software, plays a fundamental role in a blind or partially sighted person's ability to work in a wide variety of roles.

Access technology refers to a wide range of specialist equipment or software that helps blind or partially sighted people participate in activities as independently as possible. Specialist training in the use of access technology plays a fundamental role in enabling a blind or partially sighted person to gain and sustain employment.

We deliver access technology skills development throughout the UK, including group and one-to-one training in a wide range of equipment and software. This includes: video magnifiers, electronic reading aids, magnification and screen reader software, computer systems, note takers and braille technology.

This service also includes training for employers in how to make technology accessible. Through our Transcription Service we can also provide employers with advice on providing information in alternative formats such as braille, large print or audio. For more information visit:

www.rnib.org.uk/servicesforemployers

11. Mobility training and independent living skills

If someone has very little or no useful vision they will usually require some kind of mobility training before seeking a job. Mostly, this involves learning to navigate with the aid of a long cane. The cane provides, by touch and sound, what eyesight tells a sighted person about their environment.

Most social services departments will have a specialist team, often called a 'Sensory Impairment Team', which provides more specialised services to people with sight loss. The team can provide rehabilitation and mobility training, a demonstration of low vision aids and equipment, and information on local groups and clubs. Assistance from the Sensory Impairment Team – especially rehabilitation training – should be free of charge and without the need of a formal assessment. You can find the contact details of your local social services team using our [Sightline Directory](#) (see section 12 below) or by calling our Helpline (0303 123 9999).

Guide dogs are another example of a mobility aid, although only one or two per cent of blind or partially sighted people use guide dogs to get around. Information about guide dogs can be found at: www.guidedogs.org.uk

12. Sightline: a UK-wide database of service providers

RNIB has developed a UK-wide database of service providers. For example, social services, local societies, community-based organisations, colleges and libraries can offer training courses and skill development areas such as in IT and access technology, and mobility training for blind and partially sighted people.

More than 500 entries are now included in Sightline – RNIB's searchable, online directory of services for blind and partially sighted people. Simply type the phrase "access technology training" or "mobility training" along with your postcode into the Sightline directory to find your nearest provider. The directory is available at:

www.sightlinedirectory.org.uk

13. The role of the assessment

A specialist, individualised assessment is crucial in determining the needs of blind and partially sighted jobseekers. This should equip service providers with an accurate profile of their clients, based upon each individual's particular skills, barriers and personal circumstances, and thereby identify and design effective

interventions (an action plan) that are sensitive to the complex needs and circumstances of someone with sight loss.

The assessment should also not just be seen as a one-off event. True assessment can only occur over a period of time, particularly where there are multiple barriers, so any assessment system should include an in-built review – with the ability for individuals to move between levels of employment support, for when circumstances change, or new information becomes available.

13.1 RNIB's Employment assessment toolkit

RNIB has produced a toolkit for employment professionals who work with blind and partially sighted people looking for work. The **Employment assessment toolkit** will help professionals to gain a clear understanding of what a person's aspirations and abilities are in relation to employment, and what types of support and development are needed to help fulfil these. Download the toolkit from:

www.rnib.org.uk/assessmenttoolkit

14. Job clubs and job brokerage

Many blind and partially sighted jobseekers face a number of specific additional barriers to finding work due to the functional impact of their sight loss. For example, barriers might include restricted access to job seeking information, the inaccessibility of many online resources, and the negative attitudes of some employers. People with sight loss require help to overcome these barriers.

This provision might include: vocational guidance; employment workshops such as CV writing, confidence skills, practice interviews, career guidance and applying for jobs; employment skills, for example writing application forms and job search skills; disclosure techniques; developing skills to communicate specific needs and required adjustments to employers. For more information about specialist support visit:

www.actionforblindpeople.org.uk/employment

15. Job search toolkit

We have designed a job search toolkit for blind and partially sighted jobseekers, facilitators and employers, which aims to enable blind and partially sighted people to develop a variety of skills to help them get into work.

The toolkit specifically addresses the needs of blind and partially sighted people. Issues such as confidence, body language and visual presentation are all covered in an appropriate and sensitive manner. It will be of use to help people identify their personal strengths and weaknesses, while enhancing their skills. Download the job search toolkit from:

www.rnib.org.uk/jobsearchtoolkit

16. Pre-employment training

RNIB has developed a manual for trainers to deliver a structured pre-employment programme for blind and partially sighted people requiring the development of skills to move closer to the labour market. Pre-employment training courses, designed to meet the complex needs of blind and partially sighted people, offer peer support from other blind and partially sighted jobseekers, and have helped fast-track those furthest from the labour market towards finding work.

Action for Blind People delivers pre-employment courses throughout the UK, and the Trainers Toolkit, aimed at developing pre-employment skills in a group learning environment, is available to download at:

www.rnib.org.uk/preemployment

17. Residential training

Residential training courses can help people with sight loss get a job, gain more experience to keep a job or become self-employed. Blind and partially sighted people who are unemployed can apply for residential training if there aren't any suitable training courses available locally. Information about residential training and what courses are available can be found by contacting a Disability Employment Adviser at the local Jobcentre. The Royal National College for the Blind (RNC) offers a Specialist Employment Support programme for adult learners. Further information at:

www.rnc.ac.uk

18. Inclusive apprenticeships

The Skills Funding Agency has developed a toolkit to help employers develop a more inclusive and accessible apprenticeship offer. It provides practical information, sources of support and inspirational case studies of employers who have benefited from hiring and supporting disabled apprentices. Further information is available from the Employer toolkit website at:

www.employer-toolkit.org.uk

Similarly, Skills Development Scotland are keen to ensure a range of apprenticeships are open to the largest number of young people as possible. They have produced an equalities action plan for Modern Apprenticeships in Scotland to widen access. For more information visit:

www.skillsdevelopmentscotland.co.uk

19. Social enterprises

Social enterprises create opportunities for blind and partially sighted people seeking work, and include specialist intermediate labour market opportunities for people with multiple and complex needs. Examples include Cafe Tiki and Concept Catering.

Café Tiki has outlets in Glasgow, Edinburgh and Falkirk. All three cafes are fully accessible and help unemployed local people with sight or hearing loss, or additional needs, in order to learn new skills and find work. More information can be found at:

www.rnib.org.uk/scotland/cafe-tiki

All of the chefs at Concept Catering in Birmingham are living with sight loss. Here is an article that highlights some of its work:

www.rnib.org.uk/cooking-independence

20. In-work benefits check

People looking for work might wish to consider the financial implications of full or part-time paid employment. RNIB has created a benefits calculator that will help individuals to check their entitlement to various benefits, in or out of work. The benefits

calculator is designed exclusively for blind and partially sighted people, or people who care for them. For more information visit: www.rnib.entitledto.co.uk

21. Information and advice via RNIB factsheets and website

RNIB's website contains lots of information and advice to help blind and partially sighted people to stay in their jobs if they are losing their sight. Visit: www.rnib.org.uk/employment

21.1 For employers

It also has lots of useful information for employers: www.rnib.org.uk/employingsomeone

21.2 For intermediaries and professionals

It also has lots of useful information for intermediaries and professionals supporting blind and partially sighted people to gain and retain employment: www.rnib.org.uk/employmentservices

21.3 For your clients

RNIB produces a series of employment factsheets for people living with sight loss, to provide information and advice on staying in work. Factsheets that might be interesting to employment professionals include:

- Work-based assessment service
- Blind and partially sighted people at work – guidance and good practice for risk assessors
- Testing the compatibility of access software and IT applications.

Factsheets that you might want to pass on to blind and partially sighted people include:

- Access to Work
- Staying in work

- Your rights in employment.

These and other employment-related factsheets can be downloaded from:

www.rnib.org.uk/employment

22. RNIB services

22.1 Trainee grade scheme

RNIB's Trainee Grade Scheme offers paid work experience to unemployed blind and partially sighted people. Each placement lasts for 50 weeks (or until alternative employment is secured), and offers full time or part time opportunities within RNIB and Action for Blind People. For more information visit:

www.rnib.org.uk/traineegradescheme

22.2 Extending the reach service

Similarly, our Extending the Reach programme in England offers work experience opportunities with a wide range of employers. Potential candidates are carefully matched to vacancies based on their experience and skills. All placements are paid employment, and RNIB covers the cost of training and support on behalf of their employers. For more information visit:

www.rnib.org.uk/extending

22.3 Peer support

Blind and partially sighted jobseekers looking for work might benefit from peer support to help them over that final step into paid employment. Similarly, people in work but experiencing a deterioration in their sight might benefit from being able to speak with people who have been in a similar situation, and who successfully retained their employment.

RNIB Connect

RNIB provides opportunities for people to connect with each other, offer peer support, and reduce isolation via RNIB Connect. This richly diverse network comprises over 24,000 individuals, some of whom are in employment. For more information visit:

www.rnib.org.uk/connect

Living with sight loss courses

Some people a long way from being work-ready may need to develop their skills and confidence before they can reasonably expect to enter the job market. We deliver a number of confidence building courses that can help individuals to develop disability-specific skills, independent living skills, and to increase people's confidence and social networks.

Our courses provide the opportunity to discuss the challenges sight loss presents with people who have been through it and, where possible, elements of the courses are run by people who are blind or partially sighted themselves. The courses are tailored to each group of attendees but the core elements are:

- getting out and making the most of your leisure time
- coping strategies designed to address the emotional aspects of visual impairment
- practical solutions to overcome challenges to everyday living
- using technology
- looking after your eyes and making the most of your vision.

There are three programmes designed for anyone affected by sight loss; and the courses include friends and family members.

Introduction to Living with Sight Loss is a one day course best suited to people just coming to terms with sight loss, and provides information about local services and support.

Finding your Feet is a two day course that delves a little deeper. It may include speakers from other organisations who will talk about some of the services or opportunities they offer.

Living with Sight Loss course is a six week course made up of weekly day-long modules, and is delivered in partnership with other national charities and local groups.

The courses run across England. To find out where courses are being held, contact your local Action team at:

www.actionforblindpeople.org.uk

In Scotland, similar courses under the umbrella “Looking Forward” are available. For more information visit:

www.rnib.org.uk/scotland

23. Increasing your knowledge further

There is a rich body of evidence offering an insight into the circumstances of blind and partially sighted people, and the policy context that affects their employment, and that of disabled people in general. RNIB also maintains a series of position statements on crucial issues relating to the employment of people with sight loss.

These may be of interest to you, your clients, or their employers.

Here are a couple of examples:

- Between 2010 and 2013, RNIB, Action for Blind People, and the University of Birmingham carried out a three-year, action-based research project (the Enabler project) to help improve the employment prospects of blind and partially sighted people. As well as creating the **Employment assessment toolkit**, the project designed and tested innovative support strategies for those furthest from the labour market.

There is a series of reports describing the project. For example, **Developing support strategies**, which contains detailed case studies and an analysis of the key themes to emerge in supporting people a long way from being work-ready.

Download the project reports here:

www.rnib.org.uk/enablerresearch

- In 2015 RNIB commissioned the Centre for Economic and Social Inclusion to carry out a **cost benefit analysis** of the Government's **Access to Work** scheme. Specifically, the research identified the extent to which money invested by the Government in providing Access to Work support for blind and partially sighted people, and disabled people in general, benefits the wider economy. The report can be downloaded here:

www.rnib.org.uk/employmentresearch

24. Further information and resources

RNIB's Employment Practice and Research Network

The [Employment Practice and Research Network \(EPRN\)](#) has been established to support employers, researchers and employment professionals including disability management staff, in improving services for blind and partially sighted people wishing to obtain, and remain in, employment.

Useful contacts

Action for Blind People Employment Line

Web: www.actionforblindpeople.org.uk

Email: employmentline@actionforblindpeople.org.uk

Tel: 0800 440 2255

Equality and Human Rights Commission

Web: www.equalityhumanrights.com

Guide Dogs

Web: www.guidedogs.org.uk

Email: guidedogs@guidedogs.org.uk

Health and Safety Executive

Web: www.hse.gov.uk

Jobcentre Plus

Web: www.gov.uk/contact-jobcentre-plus

RNIB Legal Rights

Email: legalrights@rnib.org.uk

Other web resources

Blind and partially sighted people at work – Guidance and good practice for Risk Assessors

www.rnib.org.uk/supporting-employees

Providing training courses for blind or partially sighted people

www.rnib.org.uk/supporting-employees

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RNIB Evidence and Service Impact
January 2017

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