A plain language summary of research and evidence relating to adults with visual impairment and employment in the United Kingdom

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Contents

1 Summary

This Insight provides an overview of current data and knowledge relating to the employment of people with visual impairment (VI) in the United Kingdom (UK). Employment is a key area in which people with VI face barriers. Those barriers identified in this report include: negative attitudes of employers and the wider public; inaccessible job application processes; difficulties accessing the right type of support to find, and remain in, work; and, for those who experience sight loss whilst working, decisions regarding whether to stay in work and in what role or capacity.

Sources of support, such as Access to Work, are beneficial to many, yet findings suggest that access to support is often limited amongst those with VI. This may reflect a lack of suitability (and a need for greater tailoring or support to the needs of people with VI) and/or a lack of awareness of available support amongst both job seekers and employers.

The biggest challenge identified is the perceived attitudes of employers, who are often not aware of, or have misconceptions about, the needs, experiences and abilities of employees or potential employees who have a VI.

Reported employment rates appear to reflect these challenges; rates for people with VI fall below those with no, or other, disability. Rates range from 27% to 54%, indicating the variability in classification of VI and research sampling differences. National surveys such as the Labour Force Survey rely on self-reporting of "difficulty in seeing" as a main impairment, providing limited insight into employment amongst those with a registered sight impairment.

Several topics would benefit from greater research, notably: young people with VI transitioning from education into employment; the impact of interrelated factors such as additional and comorbid health conditions on employment prospects and experiences; the role of interventions targeted at employers; and a greater general awareness of the benefits and realities of increased inclusion of people with VI in the workplace. Longitudinal and largescale studies of employment experiences with samples of people registered as sight impaired and severely sight impaired would be of particular value.

2 About this report

2.1 About Insights

Insights are designed to aid understanding of issues relating to people with VI in the UK, and to inform and support decision-making processes by bridging gaps between research, government and charitable policy, service provision and public opinion. Insights are produced by the research charity BRAVO VICTOR and supported by the VI Charity Sector Partnership. Insights are aimed primarily at readers from within the sight loss sector, local authorities, the wider health and social care sectors and employment professionals but are also of relevance to others seeking facts, figures, and academic comment on VI and sight loss. This includes policy makers, academia, the media, retailers, transport providers, and technology companies.

Insights review and interpret research and current data (where available) to set out brief, plain language summaries. This is the first Insight produced by BRAVO VICTOR, with upcoming Insights to cover many themes and topics relating to VI, the experiences of those living with VI and sight loss, and the services and care provided to them. Insights will be updated to reflect ongoing knowledge development and policy changes to remain relevant.

These summaries are written for a lay audience and reference academic and grey (unpublished or non-commercial) literature. Searches have been conducted by reviewing electronic databases and references from relevant articles and reports, as well as websites provided by government and other appropriate organisations. Contributions and comment are welcome via the VI Insight Hub, where the Insights are hosted.

2.2 The authors

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2.3 Language and abbreviations

2.3.1 Definitions

Visual impairment:
In these reports, visual impairment/vision impairment (VI) is used as an umbrella term, encompassing severe sight impaired (blindness) and sight impairment (partial sight), defined individually below. Where referenced documents use different categorisations of, for example, 'VI', 'blindness', or 'sight loss', we provide a description of how the authors have defined the term.

Seeing difficulty:
Definition used by Office for National Statistics for visual impairment. Respondents to surveys are presented with a list of impairments and then asked to select all that apply to them and, subsequently, their "main health problem". "Seeing difficulty" in the data reported here relates to a self-reported sight impairment identified as a "main health problem".

Severe sight impairment or blindness:
Generally, people who are severely sight-impaired/blind are:

- People whose eyesight is below 3/60 Snellen
- People who are 3/60 but below 6/60 Snellen (very contracted field of vision).
- People who are 6/60 Snellen or above (reduced field of vision especially if the reduction is in the lower part of the field).

The terms severely sight impaired, and blind may be used interchangeably. An individual may be formally certified as severely sight impaired with a Certificate of Vision Impairment.

Sight impairment or partial sight:
Generally, people who are sight-impaired are:

- People whose eyesight is 3/60 to 6/60 Snellen with a full field of vision
- People whose eyesight is up to 6/24 Snellen with a moderate reduction of field of vision or with a central part of vision that is cloudy or blurry
- People whose eyesight is 6/18, or better if a large part of their field of vision is missing or a lot of their peripheral vision is missing

Sight impairment will impact substantially on daily life and does not include impairments which are correctable (e.g., with glasses). An individual may be formally certified as sight impaired with a Certificate of Vision Impairment.

Employment:
In this report, ‘employment’ refers to any type of paid work (e.g., full-time, part-time, employed or self-employed). Where a breakdown of different types of work/contract are given by authors, these are stated.

Permanent or temporary contract:

A permanent contract has no fixed end-date. An employee can remain in a role until they, or their employer, chooses to end the contract. A temporary contract may have a fixed end-date (as with a fixed-term contract), or the terms of employment will allow for termination on notice.

Full-time and part-time work:

According to the UK Government, there is no specific number of hours that makes someone full or part-time, but a full-time worker will usually work 35 hours or more a week, and a part-time worker is someone who works fewer hours than a full-time worker.

Working age:

Defined by the UK Government as those aged 18 or over, but below State Pension age (66 years). In the current report, definitions of

working-age vary between studies, the age to which working age refers is stated.

Disability:

In this report, 'disability' refers to any type of physical or mental impairment which has a substantial and long-term adverse effect on a person's ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities.

2.3.2 Abbreviations

N=: The total number of people in a sample population (e.g., the total number of participants in a research study)

n=: The number of people in a sub-sample (e.g., the number of people in one group within the total sample of participants in a research study)

VI: Visual impairment

SI: Sight impairment

SSI: Severe sight impairment

IRDs: Inherited retinal dystrophies

RP: Retinitis pigmentosa

NI: Northern Ireland

2.4 Methods

A review was undertaken of available UK evidence relating to individuals living with VI between March-April 2023. Standard reviewing techniques such as searching electronic databases, hand searching of references from relevant articles and reports, and a review of websites from government and relevant organisations were used. Stakeholders and charities within the sight loss sector were consulted and asked to provide relevant information, data, or reports that might not be publicly available for inclusion in the review process. The search for academic literature (i.e., peer-reviewed publications or published books or chapters) was limited to publication since 2018 and works relating to the UK. Given the limited research and data available on some topics of

relevance, the report includes other data and information reported prior to 2018 and from international sources as follows: where no more recent data is available, where UK-equivalent information is available, or where this data is felt to provide useful context to the report.

3 Introduction

According to the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, employment exclusion is a violation of the rights of people living with disability, yet employment is a key area of life in which people with VI continue to experience significant barriers to participation in the UK.

In 2018, around 2 million people in the UK were thought to be living with varying degrees of sight loss, and a 2021 RNIB report, which cited NHS and UK government figures, indicated that those registered as blind/severely sight impaired (SSI) or partially sighted/sight impaired (SI) totalled around 340,000 (registration is elective but requires certification from a qualified eye health practitioner). NHS figures for 2020 show that, in England, 38,230 people aged 18-64 were registered as blind/SSI, and 34,615 were registered as partially sighted/SI (27.3% of the total registered SSI and SI population in England was working age). Figures from Department for Work and Pensions are broadly similar, reporting almost 80,000 registered blind and partially sighted people of working age in the UK (around 23.5% of the total population of blind and partially sighted people estimated by the RNIB).

The majority of VI is experienced by those of older age and, given the incidence of age-related sight conditions in the UK , it is not surprising that research relating to VI has often been undertaken with older adults, either as a focus of the research, or incidentally. Yet the experiences of VI adults of working-age, including the challenges associated with employment, are significant. The limited research available highlights not only the personal financial and wider economic implications of these challenges, but also the social and emotional impact experienced by working-age adults with VI.

3.1 Economic and financial impacts of employment challenges

Financial concerns have been reported as high amongst those living with VI. The 2022 VI Lives report found that nearly a third of 800 people surveyed reported difficulty stretching their household budget, and of the 55% of people who received a disability-related benefit, a quarter did not feel that this benefit covered the extra costs incurred because of their disability. Thus, employment challenges among working age people with

VI have significant implications for personal and family financial security. Focus group research in 2016 found that having a severe sight impairment more than doubled additional minimum living costs compared to those who retain some usable sight. Whilst older adults appeared to incur greater costs in some areas compared to working age adults (e.g., transport and food), both groups reported additional costs relating to adapting and maintaining their home, healthcare, and travel. The working age cohort also faced greater costs relating to technology.

There are wider economic impacts relating to employment challenges among people with VI, such as loss of productivity. A review by Burton *et al.* (2021) estimated an overall relative reduction of 30.2% globally in employment for people with blindness or moderate/severe VI. Western Europe (including the UK) appeared least affected by productivity loss, but still experienced an estimated 40 billion USD productivity loss in 2018. The Vision Foundation suggests that high levels of unemployment amongst people with VI are a significant factor in the wider economic cost of sight loss in the UK, estimated at £28 billion in 2008. The direct cost of lower employment and absenteeism among the UK VI population in 2013 was estimated at £2,427.4 million and £77.6 million, respectively. This reflects an estimated loss of 90,108 people in the UK workforce at that point due to VI.

3.2 Social and emotional impacts of employment challenges

The impact of unemployment, loss of employment, or workplace difficulties associated with sight loss are not only financial, but also social and psychological. Research suggests that employment has a protective effect on depression and general mental health and that just 8 hours of paid employment per week may have significant mental health benefits.

A UK telephone survey of respondents with varying levels of sight loss (*N*= 101) found that those who were unemployed reported frustration due to lack of employment, a loss of employment skills leading to feelings of depression, and missing colleagues since leaving work. A report for the Royal National Institute of Blind People (RNIB) found that, for 656 blind and partially sighted survey respondents, finding and staying in employment during sight loss, was the second biggest priority

for most, and the top priority for those who had lost their sight within the last 5-20 years. This, alongside implications of employment status for mental health, makes equitable access to work even more important.

It should be noted that some with VI choose not to work (see Section 4.4) but it is not always clear what the reasons for this might be; people may have had negative past work experiences, difficulties finding work, experienced negative attitudes from employers and others, lack confidence or belief in their skillsets, view work as inaccessible, or simply prefer not to work.

4 Employment rates

Nature of impairment	Source	Year	Actual or estimate	Rate	Sample
All visual impairment	Annual Population Survey	2021-2022	Estimate	42.4%	People with “Difficulty seeing” as main impairment (16-64)
	Annual Population Survey	2020-2021	Estimate	48.7%	Working age people with “Difficulty seeing” as main disability (16-64)
	Slade et al. (RNIB)	2020	Actual	27%	990 working age registered blind/SSI and partially sighted/SI people (18-64)
	VI Lives Report (RNIB, Thomas Pocklington Trust and Guide Dogs)	2022	Actual	54%	800 working age respondents (18-64) who self-reported a VI that cannot be corrected by glasses (qualified through registration status and levels of functional difficulty).
Retinal disease	Galvin et al. (data from Deloitte Access Economics, 2019)	2020	Actual	45.5%	44 respondents with Inherited Retinal Disease from the UK
	Retina UK	2019	Actual	32%	924 survey respondents with inherited sight loss aged 18 and above
	Retina UK	2019	Estimate calculated from number	53%	554 working age respondents with

		of working age respondents		inherited sight loss (18-65)
Retina UK	2022	Actual	27%	673 respondents with inherited sight loss aged 18 and above
Retina UK	2022	Estimate calculated from number of working age respondents)	51%	357 working age individuals with inherited sight loss (18-65)

Table 1. Overview of employment rates from recent sources.

UK rates of employment amongst people with VI have been found to be lower than amongst people without VI, or other types of disability. Table 1 provides an overview of employment and unemployment rates for people with VI cited across different sources from 2019 onwards; differing rates are due to disparity in sample size, cohort, method, and inclusion criteria/terminology. Further details are provided in Appendix A.

Figures from the Annual Population Survey suggest an employment gap of 33.2% for people with VI (based on the overall UK employment rate of 75.6% in 2022, and figures for those reporting “difficulty seeing” as their main impairment). Whilst the commonly reported ‘one in four’ statistic holds true in some instances above (e.g., Slade *et al.*, 2020, and for people with inherited retinal conditions (IRD) in Retina UK, 2022) there is variability in the rates reported, and current UK population surveys do not provide a full nationwide picture of employment for people with VI. Furthermore, employment rates provide no insight into the status of those who are not working, nor the reasons that people of working age are not in employment.

4.1 Impact of age on employment

Labour Force Survey figures (see Table 2) suggest that people with sight loss at all ages were less likely to be in employment in 2020 than people with other disabilities or no disability (see Table 2). It is unclear

why people with VI may face greater difficulties finding and maintaining employment than other with disability, but factors such as the invisible nature of VI and concerns about disclosing a VI could lead to difficulties accessing workplace support, and technological challenges experienced in the workplace may be contributing factors. The biggest gap in employment between those with a seeing difficulty and those with no disability was in individuals aged 35-54 years, with a gap of 35%.

	People with a seeing difficulty	Other disabled people	People without a disability	All people of working age
16 - 34 years	46%	54%	75%	72%
35-54 years	56%	60%	91%	85%
55-64 years	43%	42%	73%	64%

Table 2. Employment rate by age group and disability or visual impairment. Source: RNIB (2021) based on Labour Force Survey figures.

4.2 Impact of impairment severity and age of onset

The VI Lives report found that a greater severity of VI may result in the need for more frequent support at home, greater use of support services from sight loss charities, and greater difficulty getting out as much as they would like. Differences in employment were not reported, although the report found that employment rates were lower among those with a registered VI (which may or may not reflect severity of impairment), compared to those not registered. UK research has thus far provided little comparison of employment rates dependant on registration status (blind/SSI or partially sighted/SI), the impact of sight loss severity on employment outcomes over time, or the impact of age of onset on these outcomes. Although, a study in Norway identified higher levels of loneliness among people with VI who were unemployed, who were also more likely to have a SSI (blindness) than a less severe VI and a more recent onset of sight loss. Evidence from Canada also indicates higher

employment rates amongst those with early onset and less severe impairments.

4.3 Impact of education on employment

A survey by Slade *et al.* (2020) found that educational attainment is a factor in employment status for blind and partially sighted people.

	Employment rate
People of working age without a disability	88%
People of working-age (all)	86%
People with another type of disability and a degree (or equivalent)	73%
People of working age with no disability and no qualifications	67%
People of working age and no qualifications	51%
People with VI and a degree (or higher)	44%
People with another type of disability and no qualifications	25%
People with VI and no qualifications	8%

Table 3. Employment rates by education status and disability. Source: Slade *et al.* (2020).

Slade found that even with a degree, blind and partially sighted people are less likely to be employed than those with no disability. In terms of education, the largest gap between blind and partially sighted people and others is found in those with no qualifications (see Table 3).

There remains a lack of largescale, longitudinal research exploring factors such as education which may impact on employment outcomes for people with VI.

4.4 Impact of additional disability on employment

Figures for 2021-2022 from the Annual Population Survey (see Table 4) demonstrate the impact of multiple conditions on employment rates; a higher number of conditions is associated with a lower employment rate.

Number of conditions	Number of people	% in employment
1	3,825	65.0
2	1,913	57.8
3	1,236	50.6
4	698	41.8
5+	1,309	28.1
	Total: 9,006	Overall: 54.3%

Table 4. Employment figures of people with one or more conditions (any condition or disability, including VI). Source: Annual Population Survey figures (April 2021-March 2022).

4.5 How many people with visual impairment choose to work?

Analysis of Labour Force Survey figures by RNIB (2021) found that 33% of people with "difficulty seeing" as their main disability said that they did not want to work, with the most common reason being due to long term sickness or disability. This compares to a UK average of 16% of working age people reporting that they do not want to work. It should be noted that the questions asking respondents why they do not work or want to find work are worded as follows in the Labour Force Survey:

"May I just check, why were you not looking for a job with longer hours or for an additional job?"

"May I just check, what were the reasons you did not look for work (in the last 4 weeks)"

This reporting suggests that respondents do not want to work but, if providing the reason of long-term sick or disabled, this does not really reflect "choice" for the individual (although, there may be other factors at play which mean an individual who is long-term sick or disabled feels unable to work, such as lack of confidence, negative past experiences, or financial concerns relating to loss of benefits).

Slade *et al.* (2020) report that of those working age blind and partially sighted people not in work, 44% wanted to find a job. Wanting to work

was closely related to age. People aged 18-29 were most likely to want to find work (71%), followed by those aged 30-49 (51%), and 50-64 (34%). Age brackets where fewer people appear to want to work are largely similar to those where the greatest employment gaps are identified (see Section 4.1). Slade *et al.* (2020) also found that 44% of respondents reported being unemployed (around 436 people out of 990), of that just 18% of respondents were looking for work. Of those not looking for work, 31% reported that they would not like to find a job.

Are you currently seeking paid work? (Asked of the full sample)		
Yes	18%	147
No	82%	552
For those not seeking work, would you like to find a job?		
Yes	31%	171
No	69%	357

Table 5. Number of respondents seeking work and wanting to find work. Source: Slade *et al.* (2020).

Whilst a ‘snapshot’ employment rate may provide an indication of employment status, this does not provide a full picture of employment experiences, including whether work is wanted or actively sought. Figures relating to the number of blind and partially sighted people who would like to find work, who are currently seeking work, who are unable to find work, should be considered alongside figures relating to employment status in order to gain an accurate understanding of the impact of sight loss on employment outcomes. Comparisons between data relating to the wider UK workforce, those without sight loss, and other disabilities in these areas would be particularly useful.

5 Types of work

5.1 Type of contract

According to RNIB's analysis of Labour Force Survey data, 97% of people with a 'seeing difficulty' that were in employment had a permanent contract with their employer in 2020. This is compared to 94% for other disabled people and 95% for people without a disability. Similar figures are reported by Slade *et al.* (2020), who found that 92% of employed survey respondents who were blind or partially sighted had permanent jobs, and 8% had temporary contracts. This suggests no difference in the likelihood of securing a permanent contract for blind and partially sighted people who are in work, compared to the general population (around 94% of UK workers are employed on a permanent contract), although, the likelihood of securing a permanent contract for someone with VI is likely to be lower, given the overall lower rates of employment amongst people with VI.

5.2 Full-time and part-time work

Labour Force Survey figures indicate that in 2020, 51% of employed people with a 'seeing difficulty' were working full-time (35 hours a week or more), compared to 50% for people with other disabilities and 63% for people without a disability. This figure is lower than that reported by Slade *et al.* (2020), who found that 62% of employed respondents (990 blind and partially sighted respondents) with VI were working full-time and 38% were employed part-time, similar to the UK average figure. This could reflect differences in samples (i.e., self-reporting of "difficulty seeing" versus "blind" or "partial sight"), as well as the recruitment of participants for Slade *et al.* (2020) through RNIB customer lists. It is possible that those participating in this research have greater access to employment support and a greater likelihood of gaining full-time employment than the wider population of people with VI across the UK.

5.3 Sector and roles

Labour Force Survey figures show that in 2020, 68% of employed people with a 'seeing difficulty' were working in the private sector (and 32% in the public sector), compared to 76% of people with other disabilities and 78% of people without a disability. In contrast, Slade *et*

al. (2020) found that 48% of employed blind and partially sighted respondents were employed in the private sector, 48% in the public sector and 4% in the voluntary sector. Findings in both instances suggest that blind and partially sighted people are more likely to be employed in the public sector than others, with Slade *et al.* noting that 22% of UK workers were found to be employed in the public sector.

An internal RNIB report by Bhangoo (2022) broke down public and private sector roles for people with VI (based on Labour Force Survey figures and self-reported “difficulty seeing” as a primary disability). Of those working in the public sector, around a third of those with VI (31%) were working for health authorities or the NHS (see Table 6). The number of individuals with VI working in the private sector was much lower compared to the non-disabled population, but private employers in public admin, education, and health appear to provide a greater proportion of employment for people with VI than for workers with no disability (see Table 7). A slightly higher proportion of people with VI are employed in banking and finance than the proportion of people with no disability. Bhangoo (2022) suggests that this may reflect the ability of these organisations to provide reasonable adjustments.

Types of public sector organisation	Rate for people with VI	Rate for UK average (no disability)
Health authority or NHS Trust	31%	25%
Local government or council (including police)	26%	35%
Central Government, civil service	22%	10%
Charity, voluntary organisation or similar	11%	10%
Armed forces	5%*	2%
University or similar	4%*	9%
Other kind of organisation	1%*	3%

* Figure unavailable or count less than 6,000

Table 6. Breakdown of VI people working in the public sector compared to the UK average with no disability. Source: Bhangoo, 2022 (not

publicly available) based on Labour Force Survey data 2018, 2019, 2020.

Types of private sector organisation	Rate for people with VI	Rate for UK average with no disability
Public admin, education and health	43%	31%
Banking and finance	22%	18%
Distribution, hotels and restaurants	14%	17%
Manufacturing	7%	9%
Other services	6%	6%
Construction	4%	7%
Transport and communication	3%*	10%
Energy and water	1%*	2%
Agriculture, forestry and fishing	*	1%

* Figure unavailable or count less than 6,000

Table 7. Breakdown of people with VI working in the private sector compared to the UK average with no disability. Source: Bhangoo, 2022 (not publicly available) based on Labour Force Survey data 2018, 2019, 2020.

Bhangoo also provides an overview of the types of occupational areas filled by individuals with VI compared to those without a disability. Similar figures are reported across both groups for most role types, including managers, directors and senior officials. Although, the largest difference in role type was found to be in relation to administrative and secretarial roles (14% for blind and partially sighted people, and 10% for people without disability). This difference could reflect many factors, including job preference, and the ability to address the needs of employees with VI more easily in certain employment contexts than others.

Occupational area	Rate for people with VI	Rate for UK average with no disability
Managers, Directors and Senior Officials	13%	12%
Professional Occupations	23%	23%
Associate Professional and Technical Occupations	12%	16%
Administrative and Secretarial Occupations	14%	10%
Skilled Trades Occupations	9%	10%
Caring, Leisure and Other Service Occupations	10%	9%
Sales And Customer Service Occupations	9%	7%
Process, Plant and Machine Operatives	2%*	6%
Elementary Occupations	8%	9%

* Figure unavailable or count less than 6,000

Table 8. Breakdown of people with VI working in different occupational areas compared to the UK average with no disability. Source: Bhangoo, 2022 (not publicly available) based on Labour Force Survey data 2018, 2019, 2020.

There remains a lack of academic research exploring and comparing the experiences of adults with VI working in different sectors and roles. Whilst literature highlights the historical emphasis on ‘blind trades’. including physiotherapy, piano tuning, short-hand and audio typing, telephony, computer programming and social work, there has been little contemporary insight into the topic. A publication by French (2017) provides qualitative exploration of the experiences of employees with VI working in a variety of sectors, including health and social work, music, teaching, and manual occupations. Although, this offers only anecdotal

insight into the experiences of the 50 people interviewed, spanning several decades.

5.3.1 Time in current job

According to RNIB's (2021) analysis of Labour Force Survey figures, employed people with sight loss had been with their current employer for longer than the UK average in 2020; 42% had been with their current employer for more than 10 years, compared to an average for the UK workforce of 32%. Twenty percent had been with their current employer for more than 20 years, compared to a UK average of 12%. This reflects trends for greater employee retention amongst people with disability in international research. This could be associated with greater perceived workplace security when working in an established role, the greater accessibility of familiar working environments (and knowledge of their VI amongst employers and colleagues), and/or the perceived challenges of finding new employment opportunities. Research exploring the retention of people with VI at work in the UK, and the reasons that these employees may stay at the same workplace for longer, is lacking.

6 Employment barriers and enablers

A review of 605 peer-reviewed academic and professional journals undertaken on behalf of Vision Foundation (2021) identified several barriers to the labour market for blind and partially sighted people. As summarised in (O'Day, 1999), these can be categorised under three key areas:

1) Personal barriers- e.g., difficulty coming to terms with sight loss, additional disabilities, low confidence in relation to travel and mobility, lack of work experience, lack of knowledge about rights, lack of confidence, having dependents, or lower levels of qualifications
2) Societal barriers- e.g., stigma attached to disability, lack of understanding of visual impairment, lack of ability or willingness to make accommodations or difficult processes to do so
3) Programmatic barriers- e.g., barriers resulting from systems and processes, such as a lack of employment support, low staff aspiration for blind and partially sighted people to find work, or a perceived 'benefits trap'

In contrast, enablers identified across the literature included

- Improved employer awareness
- Accessing vocational services
- Using social networks to find jobs
- Securing the right adaptations and technical support from employers
- Improved transport
- Personal motivation
- The opportunity to demonstrate skills to employers

Factors relating to personal, societal and programmatic barriers, and the enablers that might help to overcome these, are considered in the following sections.

6.1 Factors with the greatest impact on employment

There are a few pieces of research which have sought to rate the importance or impact of different factors influencing employment and employment experiences for people with VI. For 656 blind and partially

sighted survey respondents, attitudes of employers were perceived to be the biggest barrier for people with VI, followed by a lack of reasonable adjustments.

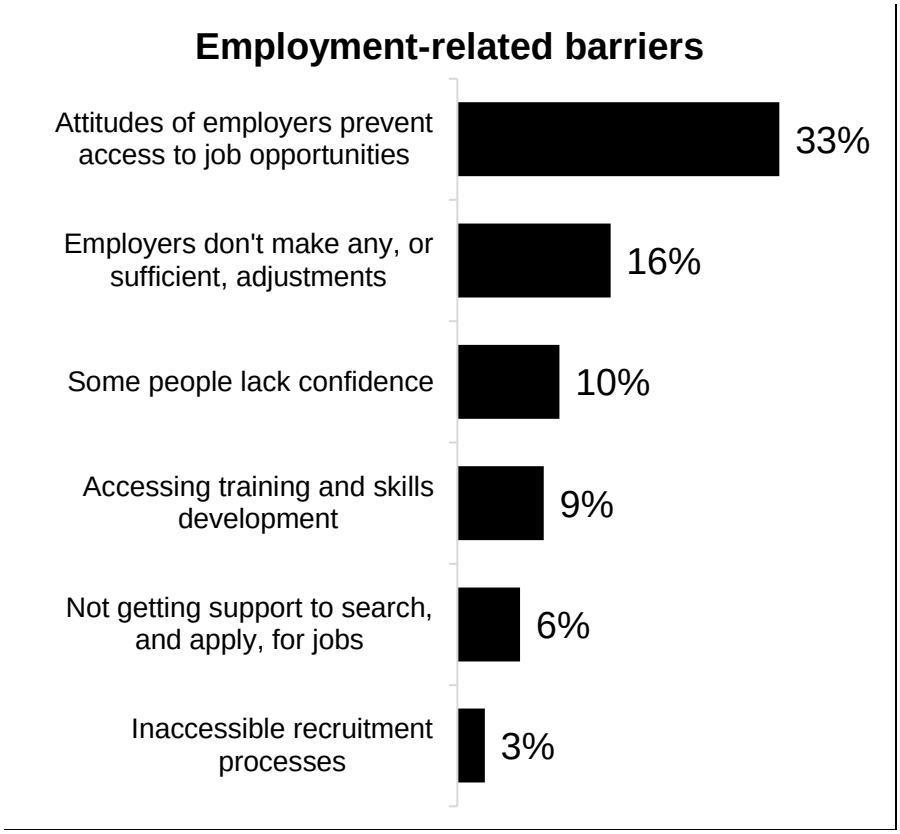


Figure 1. Relative importance of employment-related barriers. Source: Fisher *et al.* (2018).

More recently, survey research by Slade *et al.* (2020) found that of 12 factors impacting on individuals with VI getting a job, the most commonly reported were inaccessible recruitment processes, poor employer attitudes, and poor employer support (see Table 9). Sight loss came next in the list, and the research also found that three out of four (75%) blind and partially sighted people felt that their sight loss had stopped them reaching their potential at work, regardless of age, gender, ethnicity, the stage of life they experienced sight loss, their level of sight loss, or whether they were employed. 84% of people not in employment, but who wanted a job, said that sight loss had stopped them reaching their potential. For those currently in work, 66% had feelings of missed potential. Notably, whilst individuals felt that factors directly associated with sight loss impacted on employment, it was issues of accessibility and inclusion which were felt to be of greater negative impact.

	% reporting impact of factor on getting a job
Inaccessible recruitment process	36%
Poor employer attitudes	35%
Poor employer support	32%
Sight loss	27%
Location / transport	21%
General health / other disabilities	21%
Lack of suitable jobs / adaptations	6%
Lack of experience / retraining	5%
Lack of confidence / mental health	5%
Lack of recruitment support	4%
Not looking for a job / no issues	3%

Table 9. Responses to “What are the factors that prevent you from getting a job?”. Source: Slade *et al.* (2020).

6.2 Employer attitudes and public perceptions

Across the literature, employer attitudes and perceptions regarding the abilities of people with VI are highlighted as a key, if not the most important, factor impacting on the employment experiences and outcomes for people with VI.

6.2.1 Perceptions towards those with VI and their supporters

In general, negative public attitudes regarding sight loss are a common concern amongst individuals with VI; for 656 blind and partially sighted survey respondents, awareness and negative attitudes towards sight loss amongst the general public was felt to be the biggest barrier they experienced. When asked about employment-specific barriers, the attitudes of employers were perceived to be the greatest barrier faced. The Vision Foundation undertook a series of focus groups with 23

individuals, including professionals who provide employment related support to blind and partially sighted and people with VI themselves. A key finding was the overwhelming sense that employers and colleagues need to be more aware of VI in order to breakdown stereotypes and provide the right support to employees with VI.

Survey research by Jones *et al.* (2019) found that poor professional attitudes in the workplace contributed to negative feelings amongst people with VI who were already in employment. This included being treated in a condescending manner by other employees, with reports of shouting, patting, and noises of sympathy. Similar issues with employer attitudes were reported by Slade *et al.* (2020), who found that the top factors preventing people with VI from getting a job were inaccessible recruitment processes (reported by 36% of question respondents), poor employer attitudes (reported by 35% of respondents), and poor employer support (32%).

Hewett *et al.* (2022) conducted nine focus group sessions with 49 participants from Northern Ireland (NI), of whom 32 were blind and partially sighted young people in education or training or working-age adults, and the remainder were educators or parents. Participants with VI reported discrimination and negative attitudes in relation to their disability, which included inadequate preparation of employers to support visually impaired employees at work through adequate reasonable adjustment. Employment professionals (*n*= 5) who, as part of their role, provided support to individuals with disabilities to help them access employment, felt similarly, that employer preconceptions were a main barrier to employment success for people with VI. Educators (*n*= 8) and parents (*n*= 3) in the same study felt that a lack of understanding surrounding VI more generally across society was a barrier, with parents adding that this could result in employers being fearful of the unknown, rather than deliberately disregarding individuals and their needs. With a lack of understanding comes incorrect assumptions about employees' needs; these assumptions can act as a further barrier to receiving required support at work.

6.2.2 Perceptions of employers

Slade *et al.* (2020) surveyed 526 employers at small (less than 50 employees), medium (50 – 249 employees) and large (more than 250 employees) organisations across multiple fields. Results highlighted

several areas in which employers reported positive attitudes regarding the support of employees with VI, but also areas in which many were lacking in knowledge, confidence, and experience (see Table 10).

	% of employers
Did not feel confident about the accessibility of their recruitment processes for people with VI	41%
Did not feel confident in their ability to provide practical support and adaptations to someone losing their sight	37%
Did not know how to access funding to cover the costs of practical support for employees who are blind or partially sighted	52%
Thought that there may be additional health and safety risks, and limits to the working abilities of people with VI	50%
Thought that employees with VI may not be able to operate the necessary equipment	33%
Thought that employees with VI may not be able to operate a computer/laptop	33%
Thought that employees with VI may need more time to do their work	29%

Table 10. Attitudes and beliefs of employers relating to employees with VI. Source: Slade *et al.* (2020).

Research in America has highlighted negative implicit attitudes held by employers regarding the perceived competence of blind people in the workplace. This survey research with employers (*N*= 343) suggested that these negative implicit attitudes were significantly associated with knowledge about how blind people perform work tasks and, for employers who had hired a blind person, performance ratings of those employees; ratings of ‘above average’ had significantly more positive implicit attitudes towards employees with VI than those rating performance as ‘average’. Whilst this demonstrates the continued presence of negative assumptions regarding the abilities of employees with VI, it also shows that positive experiences with employees with VI contribute to more positive attitudes. Of course, this relies on the

employment of these individuals in the first place, and employees with VI should not be in a position of needing to 'prove' their capabilities to employers any more than an employee with no VI.

6.2.3 Increasing awareness of VI and the benefits of a diverse workforce amongst employers

Given the lack of understanding of VI amongst employers cited as a barrier to employment, it is not surprising that research suggests that increased awareness of VI and how to support individuals with VI might contribute to greater opportunities and work experiences for blind and partially sighted people. The 2022 VI Lives report (RNIB, Thomas Pocklington Trust and Guide Dogs) state that an improvement in the attitudes and understanding of employers is a key employment issue which requires addressing, along with the availability of specialist equipment in the workplace, and appropriate support when applying for jobs and interviews.

When asked what types of support they felt employers should be provided with, respondents to Retina UK's (2018) consultation (people with Retinitis Pigmentosa, RP) indicated that guidance on reasonable adjustments was a top priority, followed by the types of assistive technology that may be useful and how to encourage its use, Access to Work, and the symptoms and challenges associated with RP in the workplace. A general increase in awareness regarding the experiences and needs of people with RP was considered important.

The beliefs of employers have also been considered, although this is less apparent in the literature. Employers involved in the focus group research of Hewett *et al.* (2022) (*n*= 5) highlighted the value of having a diverse workforce, with people with disabilities bringing different perspectives to the workplace. Although this was a small sample, and these employers were either involved in the disability sector or actively interested in workplace inclusion. The views of this group may not reflect the wider UK employment market. A systematic review by Lindsay *et al.* (2018), which included academic articles relating to the views of both employees and employers, found that hiring people with disabilities is associated with increased business profits, cost-effectiveness, greater

employee reliability and retention, increased customer diversity and satisfaction, the development of inclusive and diverse workplace culture, and increased awareness of the abilities of people with disability amongst both other employees and the public. For employees with disabilities themselves, benefits such as improved quality-of-life, confidence, expanded social networks, and financial earning were cited. However, research exploring this topic within the UK, is lacking, with no studies included from the UK within the review.

Looking to address employer perceptions of VI, research in Greece explored the attitudes of 40 private sector employers before and after reading an information booklet containing information about the abilities and characteristics of employees with VI, reasonable adjustments, advantages of hiring employees with VI, and employment schemes and funding. Results showed initial negative attitudes relating to the employment of people with VI, amongst both those with and without experience of hiring these individuals, but more positive attitudes following the brief intervention. This included opinions regarding perceived attitudes of customers, intentions to hire people with VI, intentions to support activities which promote integration, and intentions to participate in a funded scheme to ensure appropriate infrastructures for people with VI. A similar exercise in the UK may be of value.

6.3 Finding and applying for jobs

6.3.1 Employment schemes and support to find work

Whilst employment support is increasingly provided by service providers in the sight loss sector, and by Government initiatives and financial schemes outlined in Appendix C and D, the success of these schemes to meet the needs of people with VI remains unclear.

Slade *et al.* (2020) reported that only 55% of blind and partially sighted survey respondents had received support relating to finding employment; of these, 47% were satisfied (satisfaction 6-10 out of 10) with this support and 39% were dissatisfied (satisfaction 0-4 out of 10). Taking the example of Scotland's Fair Start Scotland (FSS) scheme, launched in 2018 to provide flexible employment support to prepare individuals for work, over 12,929 people with disability (45% of 29,000

total clients) have started with the service, and 3584 of these (40%) have moved into employment. Amongst disabled service users, physical disability was the third most common type of long-term health condition (April 2018-September 2021), after mental health conditions and long-term illness, but just 1% of those with a long-term health condition or disability reported a VI. Commenting on these figures, Sight Scotland (2023, not publicly available) note that with the number of people who are blind or partially sighted in Scotland is set to increase by 30,000 in the next decade to over 200,000 people, more must be done to ensure that employment services are reachable by people with VI, and that tailored support around sight loss is available.

Respondents of Retina UK's 2019 and 2022 survey were asked what support and services they had accessed, and what impact these had had on their lives. Three of these items related directly to employment and careers: Access to Work scheme; workplace occupational health support; and support to change careers. In both 2019 and 2022, of the ten items listed (see Figure 2 and Table 14, Appendix B), advice on claiming benefits was felt to make the greatest positive difference, followed by mobility training, and then Access to Work. Those using Access to Work increased from 31% to 41%, and the number who were not aware or unable to access the scheme dropped from 30% to 19%. This indicates a positive impact of the scheme on individuals with inherited sight conditions, often characterised by deteriorating sight loss over their life, to continue in, or secure employment. Workplace occupational health support was also important, ranked 5th based on 'very' or 'some' positive difference ratings in both surveys, but in contrast, support to change careers was accessed least and had a low perceived positive impact. Figures suggest that maintaining current career plans and ensuring accessibility in the workplace was a greater priority amongst this group, and/or that this type of service may not currently be meeting the needs of individuals with IRD. Retina UK's Working Age Group Project (2018), which consulted with 171 respondents from the charity's database, found that at the point of diagnosis, 77% of respondents wanted to continue in their current employment, if possible. Despite this, 32% of respondents had made a career change since being diagnosed with RP, and a further 29% had thought about doing so.

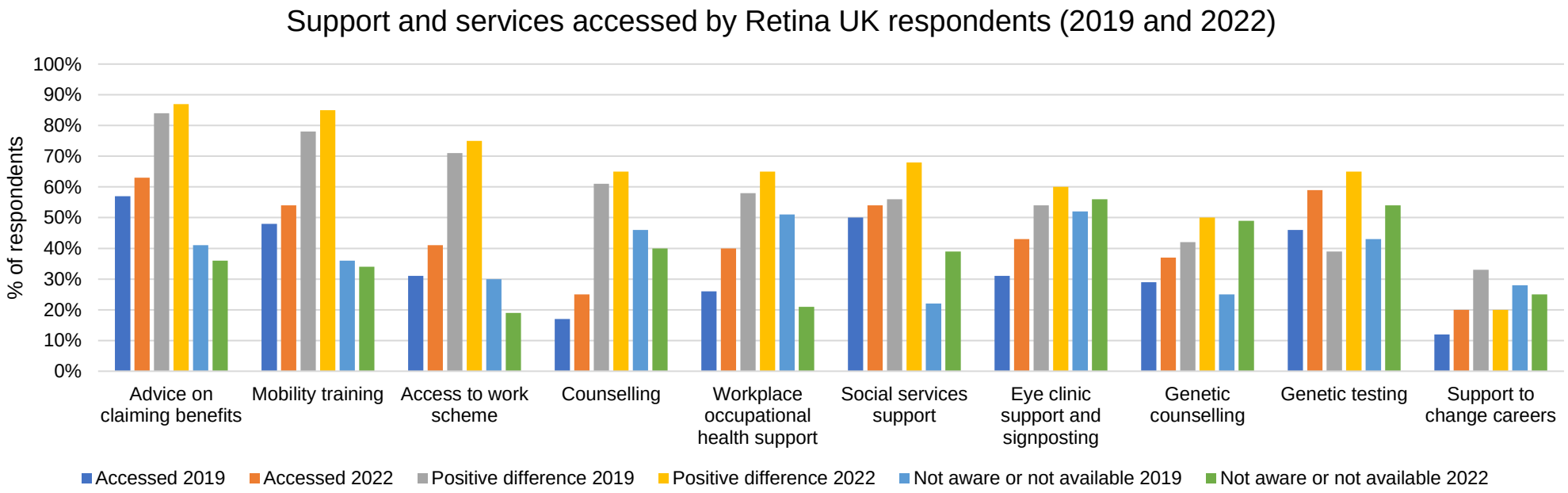


Figure 2. Support and services accessed by respondents, positive difference made by support and services (based on rating of 'very' or 'some' positive difference), and reports of lack of awareness or lack of availability. Source: Retina UK (2019) and Retina UK (2022).

2019	2022	
1	1	Advice on claiming benefits
2	2	Mobility training
3	3	Access to work scheme
4	5	Counselling
5	5	Workplace occupational health support
6	4	Social services support
7	6	Eye clinic support and signposting (ECLO)
8	7	Genetic counselling
9	5	Genetic testing
10	8	Support to change careers

Table 11. Ranking of positive impact of support and services accessed by Retina UK respondents (based on rating of 'very' or 'some' positive difference). Source: Retina UK (2019) and Retina UK (2022).

It is notable that workplace occupational health support was considered helpful by the majority of respondents in both surveys, but in 2019, it was also one of the top two sources of support that respondents were unable to access, either because they didn't know about them, or because they were not available. This indicates progress towards greater availability and promotion of such support, and perhaps a greater communication of need by employees. This may reflect positive change in considerations of accessibility instigated by the pandemic.

6.3.2 Applying for jobs

The importance of appropriate support during the job search and application process has been highlighted throughout the literature. Online consultation with 171 working-age respondents from Retina UK's contact database found that, for people with Inherited Retinal Diseases (IRD) who were applying for jobs, the types of support viewed as most useful (rated as 'extremely useful' or 'very useful' by at least 8 in 10 respondents) were advice on if, when, and how, to disclose a condition, being provided with an indication at the point of applying for a job on

what assistance might be funded by Access to Work, and increased awareness amongst potential employers of the practical and financial support available to them to employ individuals with sight loss.

The 2022 VI Lives report found that during the job searching process, VI people often feel cut off from employment opportunities, which results in frustration. Barriers included proximity to work and transport, a lack of understanding of the types of roles that can be fulfilled by someone with VI, a lack of personal confidence, fear of embarrassment and failure, and a fear of discrimination in the workplace.

Focus groups undertaken by Vision Foundation (2021) found that the application process itself is also often inaccessible, including a lack of availability of application forms in accessible and alternative formats. Furthermore, results from the focus groups found that even prior to job applications, a lack of work experience opportunities may be a major barrier which puts blind and partially sighted people at a skills disadvantage compared to sighted peers.

6.3.3 Informal and peer support

Support may also be sourced from beyond formal services and schemes. Retina UK (2019) found that in addition to formal sources of support such as Access to Work, respondents highlighted that access to peer communities which were suited to their specific situation, for example, those working in the same industry, may be valuable. These types of informal meetings with others affected by sight loss were accessed by the same proportion of respondents in 2019 (49%) as 2022 (49%), and the positive difference of this engagement was also similar in 2019 (71%) as 2022 (74%). The same proportion of respondents reported not being able to access this type of support (22%) in both surveys. Facilitating peer support groups which reflect shared career experiences and aspirations, as well as shared experiences of sight loss, may be beneficial in fostering confidence and mutual learning in relation to career continuation and development. It appears that access to such support did not progress between the two surveys, although response numbers did differ, and findings may not be generalisable beyond the experiences of those with inherited retinal conditions.

Past research suggests that social support may be associated with greater employment outcomes, although there has been no recent

research in this area, nor a consideration of the role of online forums and social media in providing support, particularly from peers, in employment and other life outcomes.

6.4 Access to work and workplace adjustments

6.4.1 Access to Work

The Access to Work scheme is designed to provide employees who have a disability or health condition with practical support to address their needs and to enable them to secure, or continue in, work. Research indicates the perceived value of the support available to people with VI through Access to Work. For example, Retina UK's (2018) research with working-age people with RP found that raising awareness of Access to Work, assistive technology, and other available support was considered 'extremely useful' by 58% and 'very useful' by 30% of respondents. This was particularly true for those aged 45-54, of whom 94% felt this was 'extremely or 'very useful'.

Whilst the support provided through Access to Work is typically viewed positively, it appears that many are not accessing the correct support at work, and there are challenges relating to the scheme's administration. The VI Lives report suggests that schemes set up by charities and the government to help find employment have not been used by four out of five eligible people. Of those surveyed and in employment, only 14% reported receiving support from the Access to Work scheme, and 6% were not aware of the scheme. The report also found that blind and partially sighted people often feel that they have to seek support, as opposed to being offered support. The report suggested a need for continuous engagement regarding requirements and available solutions.

Retina UK's (2018) consultation with working-age people with RP suggested that the speed at which individuals receive support through Access to Work is also a barrier. When asked what types of support would be helpful to those not currently in work, 88% said that lobbying to encourage faster administration of the scheme would be 'extremely' or 'very useful', and 81% said that help with finding and vetting support workers via Access to Work would be 'extremely' or 'very useful'. Similar findings were reported by Slade *et al.* (2020), who found that whilst 44%

of survey respondents who were working received support from the scheme, and viewed the scheme positively, participants reported that understanding of the scheme amongst employers was low, and the process of applying for it was difficult and often unclear. Whilst the scheme might be a key enabler (e.g., providing funding for transport or a support worker, and support from a third-party in the workplace), the speed at which decisions were made, the need for new applications when changing jobs, “slow and temperamental” processes, inaccessible forms, and a lack of flexibility in the timing and frequency of support, are all barriers to support. Raising awareness of Access to Work amongst people with VI was identified as a potential area for future work and interventions by people with VI.

6.4.2 Workplace adjustments

Whilst employers are legally required to provide reasonable adjustments in the workplace to ensure work is accessible to individuals with disability, Fisher *et al.* (2018) found that a lack of reasonable adjustments was the second most cited barrier to employment for people with VI.

A survey of 990 blind and partially sighted people (Slade *et al.*, 2020) found that, for those in employment (27% of the sample, 267 people), the most common adjustments in the workplace were the provision of special aids or equipment (62%), time off work (50%), adaptations to the working environment (41%), and flexibility in days or hours of work (39%). The 2022 VI Lives report found that assistive technology and workplace adjustments are more commonplace than flexible working hours or the provision of a support worker for employees with VI. Two in five respondents reported that no adjustments had been made for them by their employer (it is unclear if adjustments were required, had been sought, or what these requirements were).

6.4.2 Specialist equipment and technology

For individuals who have adjusted to their VI, technology is a key enabler in their employment, providing confidence and agency in the workplace, and allowing them to develop in their careers (RNIB, 2022). A survey of UK respondents with Inherited Retinal Diseases found that in the working environment, 38.9% of respondents (*n*= 18) used screen

magnifiers, 22.2% used modifications to phones (including apps), and 16.7% used a spoken word processor or screen reader. It is notable that 5.6% indicated they did not use any additional items to support their work because it was not available to them. This may reflect findings from Slade *et al.* (2020), who highlight that employers do not always feel confident in their ability to provide practical support and adaptions to these individuals, they may have misconceptions about the technological needs and abilities of people with VI, and are not confident in their ability to provide accessible materials to these individuals. This lack of employer awareness surrounding the various and often changing technological needs of employees with VI has obvious implications for accessibility of both application processes and the workplace.

Whilst focus groups carried out by Vision Foundation (2021) found that technology is often an enabler, it can also be a barrier to employment and positive employment experiences; compatibility of software with workplace systems can be a challenge and, for those with a progressive eye condition, there may be a need to adapt support over time. Knowledge about existing technology, how to access funding, and adequate technological training are essential to ensure that technology remains an enabling factor for individuals with VI. Retina UK, for example, found that guidance relating to assistive technology was considered 'very useful' or 'extremely useful' by 80% of work-age respondents.

6.5 Staying in work after sight loss

For individuals who experience sight loss during their working life, there are obvious considerations relating to continuing employment, how their sight might impact on their work overtime, and revealing one's impairment to an employer. Retina UK's (2018) working-age consultation found that, for those who were employed, specialist advice on employment, along with tailored support and mentoring, were priorities, along with guidance on how to talk to employers about their condition. Respondents felt strongly that more information at diagnosis on how their condition might develop, to inform work and career choices, was important: nearly 9 in 10 rated this type of support was either 'very useful' or 'extremely useful'. Guidance at diagnosis on how assistive technology and Access to Work can aid employment and work was also felt to be important, with 8 out of 10 respondents seeing this as 'very

useful' or 'extremely useful'. For those wanting to stay in their current employment and/or roles there was support for the idea of greater assistance in facilitating constructive dialogue between employers and employees with RP in order to advise on matters such as workplace adaptations or finding new roles.

Factors considered most useful in career progression included greater opportunity to learn new skills in order to keep pace or move to another job or field, and advice on how to negotiate suitable new roles. Guidance on coming to the end of working life, for example, early retirement, voluntary redundancy, pension planning, was revealed as a top priority amongst this group (considered 'extremely' or 'very' useful by 52% and 24% respondents, respectively). For some people with RP, taking early retirement may be considered a solution to career related issues.

A systematic review which included 3 UK studies showed the impact of RP on work and career trajectories. Career paths chosen prior to RP diagnosis tended to be viewed as impossible due to declining vision, while some made adjustments to career plans in the hope of accommodating their RP. The review found that people with RP frequently need to change jobs to suit their abilities as their eye condition worsens, and that finding work can be a struggle. Such difficulties may lead to financial insecurity, as well as concerns about careers and contributions in the workplace, and whether workplaces would accommodate them, particularly given the progressive nature of RP.

6.5.1 Disclosing a visual impairment in the workplace

The decision to reveal a VI impairment to an employer may be a difficult one for some people. People may some choose to conceal their RP in the workplace due to concerns over discrimination, termination, or being treated as less competent at work. However, people generally have a sense of relief and stress reduction for those who revealed their condition. Research carried out in the Netherlands found that concealment of a condition in the workplace can be a source of stress and lower levels of self-acceptance amongst individuals with a degenerative eye condition. Positions of higher status and job security may result in greater confidence in revealing RP.

6.6 Additional factors impacting on employment

6.6.1 Transport

To date, no available research specifically considers transport as a factor in the employment experiences of people with VI, but transport remains a key area of everyday life which creates practical and financial barriers to participation for people with VI. For example, an interview study carried out with 23 blind and partially sighted participants found that that limited access to information, inconsistencies in infrastructure and low availability of staff assistance were major concerns associated with travelling on public transport in London (Low *et al*., 2020). In contrast, concessionary travel encouraged participants to travel more, with benefits to their well-being. The implications of challenges associated with public transport, and independent travel more generally, on an individual's ability to find suitable employment roles are significant. The survey research of Slade *et al.* (2020) found that 21% of respondents to the question, 'What are the factors that prevent you from getting a job?' felt that Location/transport was a contributing factor (5th in a list of 11 items, see Table 9).

6.6.2 Comorbid conditions

As highlighted in Section 4.3, having an additional health condition or disability decreases the likelihood of someone with VI being in employment. Slade *et al.* (2020) considered the negative impact of general health and other disabilities on employment, with 21% of respondents reporting this as a contributing factor (this item was rated joint 5th in a list of 12 factors which negatively impact on getting a job, see Table 9).

Dual-sensory loss

Whilst research exploring the specific impacts of dual-sensory loss on employment and employment experiences is lacking in the UK, global academic research over recent decades suggests that individuals with both a sight and hearing impairment (dual-sensory loss, DSL), are more likely to retire at an early age than those with no sensory loss and those with only one sensory loss, to report lower participation in employment

and other productive activities (e.g., volunteering), and to experience lower employment rates than those with only one sensory impairment.

Fatigue

Research suggests that fatigue is a major problem for individuals with VI, with negative impacts on all aspects of daily life. Whilst no studies have been carried out in the UK on the impact of fatigue in people with VI on employment experiences, a Netherlands-based survey study found that individuals with VI had significantly higher levels of fatigue than those with normal vision. The need for recovery after work and health-related hindrance during work were both significantly higher amongst those with VI than those with normal sight, indicating high levels of work-related fatigue. Findings suggest that fatigue may negatively impact on the health and well-being of individuals with VI who are employed, which may be an additional barrier to employment and employment continuation.

6.7 Transition from education to work

Whilst the focus of the current report is on the employment experiences of adults with VI, there is limited data on the transition period from young adulthood and education through to employment. A systematic review found just one UK-based project article exploring the impact of factors associated with transition on the employment of people with VI. The paper focused only on social networks in college graduates. The Transitions Project was set-up in 2010 to address this gap in knowledge, although the project ran only until 2015, and data was gathered from just 78 young people with VI in England and Wales. Key findings included a lack of clarity on the relevance of, or involvement in, transition reviews and planning during high school years, and a lack of work experience opportunities, reflecting factors such as being unable to find suitable work, being restricted by attendance at a special school, or time management issues.

In 2014, Hewett *et al*. noted a lack of research into what happens to blind and partially sighted young people as they make the transition from compulsory education into further and higher education, and employment. In 2023, it appears that this broadly remains the case;

Hewett *et al*. (2022) explored the transition experiences of young people (aged 16-25) in NI in the "Eye Work with You" project, finding that barriers of perceived negative attitudes of others, direct experiences of discrimination from employers unwilling to make adjustments to address their needs, and a lack of individualised careers support, were all problematic. In contrast, enablers for young people in education or training, including being provided with the same workplace opportunities as others (which provided feelings of agency and being able to contribute in the same way as others in the workplace), work experience (which provided opportunities for personal development and to identify where adaptions might be needed in the future) and support in these roles. Further findings included the importance of individual careers support in enabling individuals to access curricula, receive VI guidance, and navigate transitions effectively. Vision Foundation (2021) suggest that there is a gap in provision relating to work experience opportunities such as internships and voluntary placements, as well as a lack of mentoring schemes and support for those who want to be self-employed. There appears to be awareness of this within the sight loss sector, with the development of schemes such as Thomas Pocklington Trust's Get Set Progress Internships Programme and Works for Me employment service. Yet, evidence relating to the efficacy of such support in meeting employment needs and outcomes in the UK is not yet available.

For blind and partially sighted people, the provision of careers advice for those in mainstream education is felt to be important, along with opportunities to connect with others with VI during young adulthood (16-18 years) to enable the sharing of experiences and knowledge. Reflecting on transition from education, Hewett *et al.* (2022) describe the need for 'Person-centred transition support', which should acknowledge an individual's aspirations, while also taking into account practical considerations relating to their disability. Both the young people and educators reflected on the importance of this tailored support, whilst parents noted a current lack of VI-aware career guidance. Hewett *et al*. propose that collaboration between school, career advisors, and educational specialists might help to provide holistic support during transition.

Outside the UK, a systematic review found that previous work experience and postsecondary education were consistent significant positive predictors of employment for American transition-age youth with

VI. Self-initiated work experience was the strongest predictor. Research offering largescale primary data relating to predictive factors of employment following transition in the UK, however, was not identified in the current report.

6.8 Confidence and psychological factors

Psychological factors such as a lack of personal confidence, fear of failure, and fear of discrimination may also act as barriers to employment. Focus group work by Vision Foundation (2021) with employment support providers and individuals with VI found that a lack of self-esteem or confidence was a barrier for some blind or partially sighted people. Focus group research in NI highlighted the impact of low self-confidence on visually impaired people's abilities to advocate for themselves, to put themselves forward, and to place themselves in potentially challenging situations, such as applying for jobs or promotions. This sense of low self-confidence may be linked to previous negative experiences at work or job searching, or individuals' attitudes towards themselves and their VI.

A lack of confidence can also impact on those already in work; Slade *et al.* (2020) found that around half (47%) of blind and partially sighted respondents had confidence in progressing their careers, but 40% were not confident that they would be given opportunities for career progression. For people with VI, both employed and unemployed, low levels of confidence acted as a barrier disclosing VI to employers and to asking for support.

7 Future research

Literature reviewing undertaken in the production of this report has highlighted several areas in which data and knowledge is lacking:

- People with VI appear less likely to be employed than people with other disabilities, but the reasons for this are unclear. Future research may wish to consider similarities and differences in the barriers faced by people with different types of disability, to inform tailored interventions. A largescale study would help to identify trends relating to, for example, the impact of factors such as access to technology and technological confidence, employees' attitudes towards their disability, disclosure of disability in the workplace, and experiences with employers and employment support, on employment outcomes.
- There is a current lack of research into what happens to blind and partially sighted young people transitioning from education into further and higher education, and employment. There is some qualitative insight into experiences in NI, but research in England, Wales, and Scotland is missing. So too is larger-scale and longitudinal insight into employment outcomes for people with VI.
- Fatigue has been associated with reduced work participation for some patient populations, but more research is needed to investigate the impact of fatigue on working adults with VI, and to explore the impact of treatment on productivity and employment continuation.
- As insight into the employment of people with VI grows, it is important to consider how intersecting characteristics may impact on their experiences. A greater understanding of the role of factors such as additional health needs or parent status may help to identify how equal employment opportunities for people with VI, whose needs and priorities may vary greatly, can be ensured.
- More data are needed on the impact of VI on employment status, wages, absenteeism, and presenteeism; this would improve estimations of productivity loss as a result of VI.
- Elsewhere, there has been some consideration of the impact of interventions aimed at increasing employers' understanding or VI and the needs of people who have VI. Yet, no such exploration has been undertaken in the UK. Research in this area would help to establish how employers might be better supported and encouraged to address issues of accessibility in their recruitment and employment processes.

- Research outside the UK has considered the benefits of hiring people with disabilities but there has been little UK-based exploration, and few explorations anywhere relating to VI. Whilst legislation should ensure equal access and treatment for all employees, highlighting benefits such as increased profits, greater employee retention, and increased workplace diversity, may provide additional incentive to employees and policymakers, to forefront the inclusion of people with VI and other disability in the workplace.
- Research suggests that people with VI stay longer in employment roles than colleagues with no disability, but the reasons for this are unknown. Research exploring the experiences of these employees in the UK, and their employers, could help increase understanding of what long-term employment experiences are like for people with VI, their career progression during this time, and the impact of employer attitudes and support on their experiences over time.

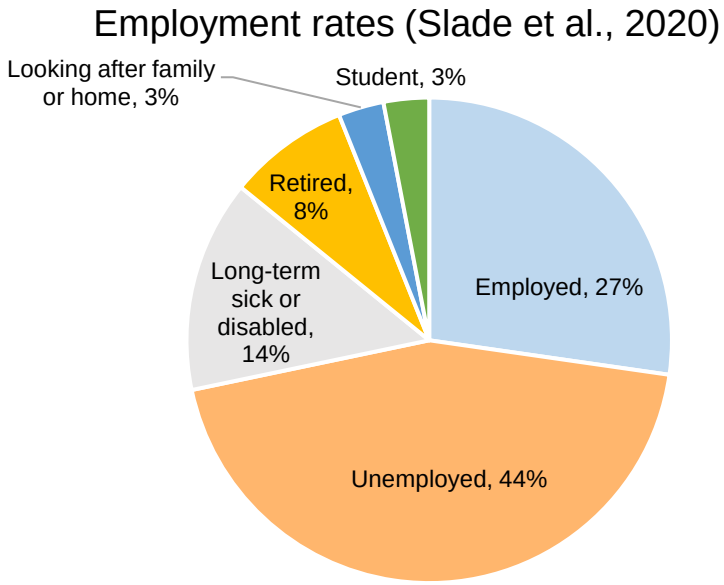
Appendix A- Further insight into current and past employment rates

Figures from the Office for National Statistics (based on the Annual Population Survey) estimate that for 2021-2022, the employment rate of those reporting 'Difficulty seeing' as their main impairment (aged 16-64) was 42.4%, compared to 48.7% in 2020-2021. This compared to a figure of 67.7% for those with a hearing impairment as their main impairment in 2021-2022, 54.3% for all people with disability, and overall UK employment rate of 75.6%. This indicates a VI employment gap of 33.2% (similar to the 28% gap reported by RNIB (2021). RNIB (2021) report that 17% of people with "difficulty seeing" were either unemployed or said they wanted to find work in the future (compared to a UK average of 8%, although figures are not directly comparable due to differences in employment rates).

RNIB have reported several employment rates over previous years and note that the 2020 employment rate figure for people with VI (48%) taken from the Labour Force Survey is much higher than previously reported. They note that this likely reflects the varying criteria used to identify people with visual impairment in these reports. Whilst previous figures (see Douglas *et al.*, 2006, and Slade and Edwards, 2015) have reflected representative samples of people who are blind and partially sighted, as noted above, the Labour Force Survey instead reflects self-reported measures of "difficulty seeing", which might capture those whose sight loss is not equivalent to sight impaired or severely sight impaired, although still impacts on their everyday life. Thus, whilst RNIB (2021) report an increase in employment of people with VI over time (2015-2020), with an increase between 2018 and 2020 of 45% to 48%, they observe that small sample sizes and differences in categorisation of disability makes identification of trends difficult.

Slade *et al.* (2020) carried out telephone interviews with 990 registered blind and partially sighted people (18-64 years) in the UK (recruited through RNIB customer lists), focus groups with 60 blind and partially sighted people, and an RNIB commissioned YouGov survey with 526 employers. This research found that one in four (27%) registered blind and partially sighted people of working age were in employment, the same rate reported as in 1991 for this group. However, that is not to say that the remaining respondents were all 'unemployed'. Results showed that:

- 27% were employed (24% of these people were paid a wage by an employer and 3% were self-employed)
- 44% described themselves as unemployed
- 14% were long-term sick or disabled
- 8% were retired
- 3% were looking after family or home
- 3% were students



Whilst Slade *et al.* (2020) found that only 27% of working age respondents were employed, figures relating to unemployment and other employment status categories (e.g., retirement, unemployed due to illness or disability) provide a more nuanced view of the current employment status of respondents. More recent figures from a survey of 800 working age respondents in the VI Lives report suggested a greater proportion of working age blind and partially sighted people in employment (54%), compared to 12% long term sick/disabled, 11% unemployed, 8% who had taken early retirement, and 8% studying.

The ‘one in four’ figure may reflect figures from some sources, but this figure alone does not provide a full picture of unemployment and the reasons that people of working age might not be working.

Employment amongst people with retinal diseases

Research for Retina UK (2019) gathered survey data from 924 survey respondents with inherited sight loss, of whom 60% (554 people) were of working age (aged 18-65). Of the full sample, 45% had retired, 18% were in full-time employment, 8% were employed part-time, 3% were self-employed full-time and 3% were self-employed part-time (see Table 11). Of the total sample, 32% were employed in some capacity, equivalent to around 53% of the working age group. This 53% figure is much higher than the 27% employment rate reported by Slade *et al.* (2020) for UK-wide working age respondents. This may reflect the unique experiences of those living with inherited retinal diseases.

Retina UK's most recent 2022 survey of 673 individuals with inherited sight loss reports similar employment figures. The % change in retired status is the only notable change, likely reflecting the decrease in working-age respondents compared to 2019 (53% of respondents were working age in 2022, around 357 people, compared to 60% in 2019). This time, of the total sample, 27% reported being employed in some capacity, equivalent to around 51% of working-age respondents.

	2019	**2022**
Employment status	**% of sample (N= 924)**	**% of sample (N= 673)**
Retired	45%	55%
Employed full-time	18%	16%
Not in paid work	16%	13%
Doing voluntary work	9%	8%
Employed part-time (working 30 hours or less)	8%	7%
In full or part-time education or training	6%	4%
Self-employed part-time	3%	3%
Self-employed full-time	3%	1%
Other (please specify)	7%	6%

Table 12. Employment status of survey respondents with inherited sight loss. Source: Retina UK (2019).

Exploration of the socioeconomic impact of inherited retinal diseases (IRD) in the Republic of Ireland (RoI) estimated that those with IRD in the RoI were 55.7% less likely to be employed for a paid job than the general population. Based on the same source data, a review of financial and non-financial impacts of IRD in the RoI also highlighted differences in the employment rate of respondents with IRD: 45.5%, compared to a general population employment rate of 76.1%. The review reported that in the UK, persons with an IRD were 40.2% less likely to be in paid employment than the general population. This is perhaps not surprising given findings from Retina UK (2019), who reported that of 924 respondents with inherited sight loss in the UK, 77% felt that their career or job had been affected to some degree by their VI, with 47% reporting this impact as 'significant' or 'extreme'.

Ranking by % affected to some degree			**Affected to some degree**		**Impact is 'significant' or 'extreme'**	
2019	**2022**		**2019**	**2022**	**2019**	**2022**
1	1	Mobility and getting around	97%	98%	64%	63%
2	2	Leisure time and hobbies	94%	96%	58%	52%
3	3	Social life	91%	91%	46%	43%
4	7	Career / job	77%	77%	47%	35%
5	4	Day-to-day routines	92%	93%	33%	31%
6	5	Falls or accidents	90%	90%	30%	29%
7	6	Communication	75%	79%	29%	24%
8	8	Relationships	71%	74%	24%	18%
9	9	Family life	73%	71%	22%	17%
10	10	Education	55%	57%	21%	14%

Table 13. Factors impacted by inherited sight loss Source: Retina UK (2019).

Similar figures were found in 2022. The same proportion of respondents felt their Career/job had been impacted to some degree as in 2019 (77%), but a lower proportion this impact as ‘significant’ or ‘extreme’ (see Table 12). It is also notable that Career/job was rated as the 7th most cited factor affecting respondents to some degree in 2022, compared to the 4th in 2019. The authors suggest that this change may reflect the impact of the pandemic on increasing accessibility within employment contexts, although proportions of responses suggest difficulties remain.

Appendix B- Support and services accessed by Retina UK respondents

Ranking by positive difference			Accessed		Positive difference		Not aware or not available	
2019	**2022**		**2019**	**2022**	**2019**	**2022**	**2019**	**2022**
1	1	Advice on claiming benefits	57%	63%	84%	87%	41%	36%
2	2	Mobility training	48%	54%	78%	85%	36%	34%
3	3	Access to work scheme	31%	41%	71%	75%	30%	19%
4	5	Counselling	17%	25%	61%	65%	46%	40%
5	5	Workplace occupational health support	26%	40%	58%	65%	51%	21%
6	4	Social services support	50%	54%	56%	68%	22%	39%
7	6	Eye clinic support and signposting (ECLO)	31%	43%	54%	60%	52%	56%
8	7	Genetic counselling	29%	37%	42%	50%	25%	49%
9	5	Genetic testing	46%	59%	39%	65%	43%	54%
10	8	Support to change careers	12%	20%	33%	20%	28%	25%

Table 14. Support and services accessed by respondents, positive difference made by support and services (based on rating of ‘very’ or ‘some’ positive difference), and reports of lack of awareness or lack of availability. Source: Retina UK (2019) and Retina UK (2022).

Appendix C- Overview of legislation, employment policy and government strategy

Legal requirements for employers

The Equality Act 2010 made disabled people's employment right clearer. It is against the law for employers to discriminate against a person because of a disability. The Equality Act 2010 protects people with VI, which covers areas including application forms, interview arrangements, aptitude or proficiency tests, job offers, and terms of employment, including pay, promotion, transfer, and training opportunities. An employer must make reasonable adjustments to avoid an employee with disability being put at a disadvantage compared to non-disabled people in the workplace. For example, adjusting working hours or providing specialist equipment to help someone do their job.

The Equality Act

The Equality Act came into force on 1 October 2010, which prohibits discrimination against people with protected characteristics (including disability) in Chapter 1 of the Act. The Act provides Britain with a discrimination law which sets out a legal framework to protect disabled people from unfair treatment and promotes a fair and more equal society. The act applies to England, Wales and Scotland.

Government Policy/ Strategy

The UK, Welsh and Scottish governments, and the NI Executive, share a commitment to making the world of work more inclusive and accessible for people with disabilities. This has seen the development of various strategies across the devolved nations:

UK Government's new Disability Action Plan

In 2021, the Government's 'National Disability Strategy' was published, setting out the commitment and changes to how the Government works with, and for, disabled people. However, the High Court ruled the Strategy unlawful in January 2022 because the UK Disability Survey which informed the Strategy was held as a voluntary consultation, failing to comply with the legal requirements for public consultation. Following this, a new 'Disability Action Plan' will be consulted on and published in 2023, which will set out practical action across government to improve disabled people's lives over the following two years.

Welsh Government's Action on Disability: The Right to Independent Living Framework and Action Plan

The Welsh Government published 'Action on Disability: The Right to Independent Living Framework and Action Plan' in October 2019. It includes delivering a cross-government approach to support working-age people to overcome employment barriers, and gain and obtain sustainable employment.

Scottish Government's Fair Work Action Plan

Fair Work Action Plan, published in December 2022, sets out actions to promote fair and inclusive workplaces across Scotland. The Fair Work Action Plan, central to the Scottish Government's economic strategy, is a unified plan which aims at tackling the gender pay gap and the disability employment gap, along with the anti-racist employment strategy. The employment rate of disabled people in Scotland was estimated at 49.6% compared to 80.8% for non-disabled people. The Scottish Government aims at reducing the Disability Employment Gap to 18.7% by 2038.

Northern Ireland's Disability Action Plan 2022-25 and the New Disability Strategy

In NI, employment is covered by the Disability Discrimination Act. It is unlawful for employers to discriminate against people with disabilities in their recruitment and selection procedures. The New Disability Strategy (announced September 2020), aimed to tackle inequalities and obstacles that affect the everyday lives of disabled people. The Disability Action Plan 2022-25 sets out how the NI Assembly Commission proposes to meet its statutory obligations under the Disability Discrimination Act 1995. The Act promotes positive attitudes towards people with disabilities and encourage participation by people with disabilities in public life. Note, no specific sections address 'employment' in either the New Disability Strategy 2020 or the Disability Action Plan 2022-25.

Guide Dog Voluntary Scheme

Guide dogs, or assistance dogs, are regulated under a voluntary scheme, meaning that there is no clear government policy on issues relating to Guide dogs. However, Guide dogs are fully protected under the Equality Act 2010, which prohibits service providers, including taxis

and restaurants, from discriminating against those who need a guide dog with them. However, there are still concerns about discrimination against Guide dog users who may still be turned away from taxis, businesses, services or public place because of their Guide dog.

The UK's Disability Confident Scheme

The Disability Confident scheme helps employers recruit and retain disabled people. The Scheme aims to challenge attitudes and increase understanding of disability, remove barriers to disabled people and ensure equal opportunities are provided to fulfil disabled people's potential and aspirations. The scheme has 3 levels designed to support employers on their Disability Confident journey: Disability Confident Committed (Level 1); Disability Confident Employer (Level 2); Disability Confident Leader (Level 3). All employers join the scheme at Disability Confident Committed (Level 1), and progress through the levels to achieve the one that's right for their organisation. As of 31st October 2021, there were over 20,000 employers actively engaged in the Disability Confident scheme. It is notable that perceptions of 'Disability Confident' scheme amongst people with VI may not always be positive, with Vision Foundation (2021) finding some scepticism due to the self-certifying nature of the scheme and the feeling of this being a tick-box exercise.

Appendix D- Employment schemes and financial support available to people with visual impairment in or out of work

Employment and Support Allowance (ESA)

For individuals with VI or other disability, financial support is available, through successful application, through the Employment and Support Allowance (ESA), introduced in 2008. ESA provides individuals with money to help with living costs if they're unable to work, or support to get back into work if they're able to. Individuals can claim for ESA if they are employed, self-employed or unemployed.

A report by Deloitte Access Economics (2014) estimated the total spend on ESA payments to individuals with sight loss in 2013 at £23.27 million (see Table 13), with the greatest spend tending to be associated with the Assessment phase (the time between a claim commencing and a decision on whether a claimant has capability for work related activity).

Employment and Support Allowance (ESA)	Recipients (number)	Rate (£ per year)	Total (£ million)
UK			
Assessment phase	2,804	5,131.78f	14.39
Work related Activity Component	2,814	1,483.46g	4.18
Support Component	2,591	1,814.57h	4.7
Total - ESA	8,210	N/A	23.27
England			
Assessment phase	2,155	5,131.78f	11.06
Work related Activity Component	2,163	1,483.46g	3.21
Support Component	1,992	1,814.57h	3.61
Total - ESA	6,310	N/A	17.88
Wales			
Assessment phase	166	5,131.78f	0.85
Work related Activity Component	167	1,483.46g	0.25

Support Component	153	1,814.57h	0.28
Total - ESA	486	n.a.	1.38
Scotland			
Assessment phase	300	5,131.78f	1.54
Work related Activity Component	301	1,483.46g	0.45
Support Component	277	1,814.57h	0.5
Total - ESA	878	N/A	2.49
N.I.			
Assessment phase	183	5,131.78f	0.94
Work related Activity Component	184	1,483.46g	0.27
Support Component	169	1,814.57h	0.31
Total - ESA	536	N/A	1.52

Table 13. Total direct payments to people with sight loss and informal carers, by direct payment type 2013. Source: Deloitte Access Economics (2014).

Blind Person's Allowance (BPA)

Blind Person's Allowance is a tax-free allowance which can be claimed via HM Revenue and Customs (£2,600 for the tax year 2022-23). In England and Wales, this can be claimed if someone is registered with a local council as blind or severely sight impaired or has certification confirming that they are blind or severely sight impaired. In Scotland and Northern Ireland, Blind Person's Allowance can be claimed if the individual cannot do work for which eyesight is essential and has certification confirming that they are blind or severely sight impaired. Figures suggest that there were 36,200 claimants of Blind Person's Allowance in 2021-22.

Northern Ireland- Personal Independence Payment (PIP)

Personal Independence Payment (PIP) is a benefit that has replaced Disability Living Allowance (DLA) for people between the age of 16 and 64 in Northern Ireland. PIP can be paid whether one is in or out of work

or training. There were 181,110 Claims in Payment in November 2022, with a 70% award rate.

Scotland- Workplace Equality Fund

Workplace Equality Fund aims to incentivise and support collaborative projects that reduce employment inequalities and cultivate positive, fair, and inclusive workplace practices. This is supported by Advice Direct Scotland, in partnership with the Scottish Government. The fund aims to distribute £800,000 per annum to eligible partnership projects which supports the priority groups, including disabled workers.

Access to Work

Access to Work is a publicly funded employment support scheme that helps disabled people to start and stay at work. It provides practical and financial support for those who aged 16 or more with a disability or mental health condition in England, Scotland or Wales. An Access to Work grant can be provided for purchasing help and equipment in the workplace, adapting equipment to make it easier for employees to use, and providing assistance beyond reasonable adjustments, such as money towards extra travel costs to and from work, an interpreter at a job interview, or a job coach. Access to Work does not provide the support itself but provides a grant to reimburse the agreed cost of the support that is needed. Access to Work provision was approved for 37,710 people in the financial year 2021 to 2022 (total expenditure £149.9 million) (Department for Works & Pensions, 2022a).

Health Adjustment Passport (HAP)

The Health Adjustment Passport (HAP) is a tool to identify and record what support and changes, known as reasonable adjustments, may be needed by an individual, agreed between an employee with a reported disability and their line manager. The HAP, owned by the claimant, can be used to apply for the Access to Work scheme.

Jobcentre Plus

Jobcentre Plus is a government-funded employment agency and social security office, aiming at helping people of working age find employment, as well as helping employers to grow their business in the UK (Jobcentre Plus, 2023). It is part of the Department of Work and Pensions. Jobcentre Plus provides resources to enable jobseekers to find work, a recruitment support service, vacancy advertising service, and advice

service, which includes signposting advice on Access to Work, Health Adjustment Passport, reasonable adjustments and Disability Confident Scheme.

Reasonable Adjustments

Typical workplace adjustments include but not limited to assistive software and equipment, adjustments for light and noise, adjustments for tasks and roles, adjustments for how meetings are run, and how documents are formulated. Assistive software and equipment includes: a larger screen, high visibility keyboard, braille devices, adjustments to display screen settings like screen resolution or accessibility settings, adjustments to desk location including a fixed desk rather than hot desking, magnification for paper documents, providing facilities to support a service dog on site, screen magnification, screen reading (text to speech) and dictation software (speech to text or speech control).

Intensive Personalised Employment Support (IPES)

Intensive Personalised Employment Support (IPES) is a voluntary provision aimed at helping people with a disability, and people with complex barriers to employment. IPES is for people for whom other support, such as the Work and Health Programme (WHP), is unsuitable. IPES assists individuals who are more than 12 months from the job market to find sustainable paid employment, or self-employment, or develop the skills through an individually tailored combination of guidance, learning and training. Participants go through: initial engagement and assessment, pre-work support, and in-work support.

Work and Health Programme

The Work and Health Programme (WHP) was introduced in England and Wales in November 2017. It provides support to people with a disability, as well as the long-term unemployed, to enter and stay work. People are referred by local Jobcentres Plus to work with a ‘Provider’, from the public, private and voluntary sectors, who received a service delivery fee and outcome-related payment when a person reaches a specified level of income once in employment, or records 6 months of being in self-employment. Providers support participants for up to 15 months, which may be extended for a further 6 months to provide in-work support.

Between November 2017 and November 2022, 360,000 individuals were referred to WHP, with 250,000 starting on the programme. Of those who

started on the WHP up to November 2020, 26% achieved a job outcome, and 41% achieved first earnings from employment within 24 months.

Full Employment Insight on the VI Insight Hub.