

Sight Scotland
Call for views: Disability Employment Gap
February 2023

About Sight Scotland

At Sight Scotland we’re tackling vision loss together. Our mission is to reach everyone in Scotland with sight loss – where and when they need us. We are here for everyone affected by vision loss in Scotland. We offer support and advice, campaign for equal rights and fund medical research. We provide learning, care, accessible formats and support blind and partially sighted people in their communities.

Our services include The Royal Blind School and education outreach services in mainstream schools, residential care for children and adults, the provision of formats which enable equal access to the written word for people with sight loss, emotional support and information to anyone living with or impacted by sight loss through our support line and community service, and expert rehabilitation and mobility training to enable people to regain independence after sight loss.

To get free support you can call Sight Scotland on 0800 024 8973. You can also get in touch by emailing us at help@sightscotland.org.uk, or by visiting our website Sightscotland.org.uk.

Disability Employment Gap

8. What progress has been made since 2016 to reduce and remove barriers faced by disabled people to access Scotland’s labour market?

The most recent Scottish Government report "Fairer Scotland for disabled people - employment action plan: progress report - year 2" published in 2021 showed that Scotland's disability pay gap worsened between 2018 (8.3%) and 2019 (16.5%), yet the reason for this significant increase in just one year could not be identified. The report also found that, for every £1 that a non-disabled employee earned in 2019, a disabled employee earned £0.83 on average. A possible cause for this can be attributed to occupational data which shows the proportion of disabled people in higher paid roles fell between 2018 and 2019, which could have contributed to this gap.

The disability employment gap has, however, narrowed year on year since 2016. At this time, the target was set to at least halve the gap by 2038. This is currently tracked by two interim milestones in the Scottish Government’s Action Plan:

To increase the employment rate of disabled people to 50% by 2023;

To 60% by 2030

To halve the gap by 2038 the employment rate of disabled people must increase by at least 1% every year, which has been achieved so far – 42.8% in 2016 to 29% in 2019.

Focusing specifically on the experience of those with a visual impairment, there remains many barriers to access Scotland’s labour market. Only one in four registered blind and partially sighted people of working age in the UK are in employment.

9. What are the remaining challenges, and why has progress been difficult?

For those with a visual impairment, being out of work or struggling to find employment can have a serious detrimental impact on a person’s mental health and wellbeing and their financial security. Those with a disability are more likely to live in poverty, and may have increased living costs associated with disability related expenses. This is especially true in light of the current cost of living crisis and rising inflation. Without increased specialist and targeted support for those with a visual impairment, as well for employers, there is a real risk that blind and partially sighted people could fall into a cycle of prolonged periods of economic inactivity.

Further uptake of the Disability Confident employer scheme, BASE and the PSP would encourage and support other organisations to recruit and retain disabled people and those with health conditions. While the Disability Confident employer scheme is a UK Government scheme, the Scottish Government should assess how it can encourage more employers in Scotland to sign up to the Disability Confident employer scheme and any additional actions which can be taken to support the scheme. This includes further promotion of the Scottish Union of Supported Employment (SUSE), the lead partner in the Disability Employment Gap Public Social Partnership (PSP), to get more organisations to take up the training on offer. Renewed efforts are needed to support employers who are willing, but perhaps unsure, to make changes to their employment practices.

Having a disability or disabilities should not be a barrier to accessing quality work, skills development, career progression or fulfilment at work, yet disabled people are more likely than non-disabled people to be unemployed or in low paid work. It is also important to consider the intersecting characteristics of those furthest from the job market. We need more data to determine how different characteristics impact each other, e.g. someone with sight loss who is also a lone parent, and therefore what actions need to be taken to create equal opportunities for employment in varying circumstances. Developing Scotland’s Fair Work policy and implementing current Fair Work commitments should be informed by timely data on Fair Work which reflects the changes caused by the pandemic.

Equity of opportunity is only one challenge. Retention and adaptations in the workplace are areas where more action is needed to ensure fair work across all sectors. Although some employers have good competence around what adaptations or changes can be made to include disabled people in the workplace, there are knowledge gaps and/or misconceptions about what structural changes are needed.

Attitude change towards hiring and supporting persons with disabilities should also be considered. Employers generally report positive attitudes towards persons with disabilities, but this doesn’t always translate into practice. One reason for reluctance can be the associated cost of adapting the workplace, but with an increase in home working because of the pandemic, employers are realising how being flexible in work location is beneficial to both them and their employees. Studies have shown that employers have reported multiple benefits from accommodating workers with disabilities, including retaining qualified employees, avoiding costs associated with hiring and training new employees, and increased business profitability/efficiency. Despite this, more needs to be done to expand support Fair Work practices among employers who may not see this as a priority right now.

Attention should also be paid to the routes to quality work, including access to higher education. Despite blind and partially sighted people excelling in a wide range of careers, people with sight loss are still underrepresented in the workplace. Blind and partially sighted students face a number of barriers both in further and higher education. These barriers largely centre around a lack of support, a lack of accessible equipment or formats and issues around transport or accessible accommodation. The Thomas Pocklington Trust investigated colleges across the UK, including in Scotland, and found that only 2 out of 10 were compliant with disability accessibility regulations. This means 80% of colleges across the UK are breaching legislation requiring them to provide information and learning in accessible formats.

10. What policy measures would you like to see to support disabled people and employers to increase participation rates in the labour market?

There are a number of programmes and initiatives all aimed at improving disabled people’s access to employment and while each has its merits, it can be a confusing landscape to navigate both for employers and employees. More work is needed to make people aware what support is available to them and how these initiatives, policies and programmes interact with each other.

‘Opportunity’ is a key dimension of the Fair Work and must be a top priority post COVID-19 with a renewed effort to assess current programmes and how they can go further to meet the needs of people living with sight loss. This includes establishing specialist employability support across the country to enable more people with visual impairment to find work and remain in quality jobs. The latest figures from Fair Start Scotland (FSS) (period April 2018 to September 2021) show that 44% of people joining FSS reported a disability. The proportion of disabled participants decreased between years 1 to 3 from 55% in year 1, to 44% in year 2, and 32% in year 3. In year 4 it increased once more to levels similar to year 2 - 45% in April – June 2021 and 43% in the most recent quarter.

The figures also showed that overall, 63% of people joining FSS reported having a long-term health condition, 30% reported no long-term health condition, with the rest (7%) unknown. In the most recent quarter of year 4, 57% of people reported a long-term health condition, 34% did not, and for 9% this was unknown.

A physical disability was the third most common type of long-term health condition reported, yet only 1% of those who reported long-term health conditions from April 2018 to September 2021 said they were blind or partially sighted. As 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, it is encouraging that Ministers have extended the delivery of FSS services with the current contractors up to 31 March 2023 but more must be done in the next phase to reach blind and partially sighted people and deliver more tailored support around their sight loss needs. The recently published Fair Work Employer Support Tool to enable employers to self-assess their working practices against the dimensions of Fair Work is useful,and  should be further promoted so that more employers are aware of it.

We welcomed the announcement of an additional £70 million investment in youth employment through the Youth Guarantee and would like to see further steps taken to ensure employment programmes such as the Youth Guarantee and Fair Start Scotland are inclusive for young blind and partially sighted people. There is also a need for specialist visual impairment apprenticeship programmes to be established and better provision of specialised support in universities and colleges, so that more young people with visual impairments in Scotland have a positive destination beyond secondary education.

11. What has been the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on disabled people’s experience of the labour market?

While there has been incremental progress to closing the gap year on year since 2016 progress been slow and more action is needed. Evidence shows this is likely due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic which had a significant impact on not only the labour market, but on volunteering and educational opportunities too.

While there have been a range of initiatives and recommendations made aimed at reducing the disability employment gap, some of these have been paused due to the pandemic. For example, the review of Fair and Healthy Work for All as part of the Health and work strategy in 2019 made a number of recommendations to address the barriers faced by disabled people on entering into and remaining in work. These recommendations were not progressed in 2020 as intended, due to the need to re-allocate staff as a result of the pandemic.

As we recover from the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is imperative to make Fair Work a priority and introduce new approaches to work and employment to ensure Fair Work practices become the norm. This includes more targeted policies to secure and sustain employment for those living with sight loss.

Nicoletta Primo
Policy and Campaigns Lead
nicoletta.primo@sightscotland.org.uk