

A Clearer Picture: Mapping Adult Vision Impairment Support in Scotland

Project commissioned by Vision Collaborative Scotland and delivered by Birch Tree Associates 2026

Summary

Introduction

Birch Tree Associates was commissioned by Vision Collaborative Scotland in 2025/26 to undertake a mapping exercise of the vision impairment support landscape across Scotland. The Collaborative was keen to gain a better understanding of the support available and patterns of service delivery nationwide, to inform and strengthen its partnership activity. The contributions of both statutory and third sector organisations in completing the questionnaires are greatly appreciated.

This research was funded by Sight Scotland, reflecting its commitment to supporting the wider sight loss sector through the provision of insights that can help improve outcomes for people living with sight loss.

Key findings

This work provides the comprehensive first Scotland-wide picture of the support available to adults with vision impairment and blindness following clinical treatment. Information was gathered from 46 organisations, including 30 Health and Social Care Partnerships (HSCPs) and 16 charities.

The research found that a substantial range of support is available across Scotland, with more than 1,000 reported instances of service delivery spanning 13 different areas of support.

The mapping examined 13 service areas, including:

1. Vision impairment support following acquired brain injury
2. Advice, signposting and income maximisation
3. Advocacy and human rights-based support
4. Community capacity building and participation
5. Emotional and psychological support
6. Eye clinic patient support service
7. Further and higher education, employment and skills development
8. Policy and/or campaign activities
9. Social, recreational and sporting activities
10. Support for family members and carers
11. Tech assessment, supply and support
12. Vision impairment training and public awareness
13. Vision rehabilitation

The most widely available services were found to be:

- Vision rehabilitation
- Technology assessment and support
- Advice, signposting and income maximisation
- Vision impairment training and awareness activities

However, the research also found that services are not distributed evenly across Scotland. Some areas have a broad range of support while others have significant gaps.

A key finding is that while a service may be available in a particular area, this does not always mean that the full potential range of component services within that service area is provided. For example, emotional and psychological support is offered in many locations, but comprehensive provision of all potential elements, such as counselling, peer support, and confidence-building programmes, is less common.

The research also found that while national services can offer information, advice and specialist support, they differ from local provision in accessibility, reach and depth of support, and should not automatically be seen as replacing local services.

How services are delivered and the risks facing them

The mapping shows that support for people with vision impairment relies on a mixture of statutory services and charities.

No single delivery model dominates. Services are provided through:

- Direct HSCP delivery (25%)
- Services commissioned by HSCPs and delivered by charities (24%)
- Services funded and delivered directly by charities (21%)
- Hybrid and other arrangements using both public and charitable funding (30%)

It is evident that Charities play a particularly important role in Scotland's vision impairment support landscape, delivering 46% of all adjusted services. In some areas, their contribution goes beyond simply adding value to statutory provision, with charities delivering core services that many people rely on. This is particularly evident in technology support, eye clinic support services, and aspects of rehabilitation provision.

One of the most important findings is that just because a service is available, does not mean it is secure.

Some of the most well-established services were also identified as facing the greatest risks. Vision rehabilitation is available in almost every part of Scotland, yet organisations providing these services reported significant concerns about their future sustainability. A similar pattern was evident for patient support services based in eye clinics.

The research also found that many services rely on a single provider within a local area. As a result, the loss of funding, staffing, or organisational capacity could lead to a rapid disruption in support for people who depend on these services.

The most common risks reported by charities were:

- Falling charitable income (39%)
- Recruitment difficulties (16%)
- Wider workforce pressures (13%)
- Challenges within Health and Social Care Partnerships (13%)

The research suggests that the support system is generally stronger at helping people maintain day-to-day independence than at enabling broader participation in society.

Services that support independent living, such as vision rehabilitation and technology support, tend to be more widely available across Scotland. By contrast, services related to employment, community participation, advocacy, campaigning, and social inclusion are more likely to be limited in availability or have gaps in provision.

What this means and the questions Scotland must answer

The research concludes that Scotland has a vision impairment support system that is substantial and valued, but also uneven and sometimes fragile.

A central question raised by the research is:

What is the purpose of the system?

Is it primarily intended to help people cope with sight loss and maintain independence, or should it also help them participate fully in education, employment, community life and wider society?

The mapping suggests that current provision appears stronger in supporting independence than participation.

Other important questions include:

- What level of variation between areas is acceptable?
- When does variation become unfairness or inequality?

- What should a minimum local service offer look like?
- Which services should always be available locally?
- Which services can reasonably be delivered nationally?
- How much should the system depend on charity funding?
- What makes a service genuinely secure and sustainable?

The mapping exercise also highlights a significant gap in the evidence base: while it provides information on the services organisations report delivering, it does not capture people's lived experience of accessing and using those services in practice.

As a result, the research offers a valuable picture of service provision across Scotland, but not of how effectively services meet people's needs or the outcomes they achieve.

Conclusions

Vision Collaborative Scotland now has a much clearer picture of the support available across Scotland and is sharing these findings with the wider sector. It shows a sector that is committed, extensive and valued, but also uneven and vulnerable in places. The next step is to build on this evidence, alongside the lived experiences and perspectives of vision-impaired and blind people, to shape a shared understanding of what support should be available, how consistently it should be delivered across the country, and how it can be sustained for the future.

By bringing together service providers, statutory partners, and people with lived experience, the sector has an opportunity to strengthen provision, address gaps and inequalities, and ensure that everyone with vision impairment can access the support they need to live independently and participate fully in society.

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