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## Network 1000

**Visually impaired people's access to  
employment**

**Summary of findings**

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**RNIB** supporting blind and  
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# **Visually impaired people's access to employment: Summary of findings**

This summary report presents findings from Network 1000 Survey 2. The data was collected during interviews with 503 visually impaired people of working age between November 2006 and January 2007. All the participants were registered as either blind or partially sighted and lived in Great Britain. Sampling and analysis accounted for the age distribution of the visually impaired population.

The summary focuses upon data relating to employment. A full report is available on the VISION 2020 UK website listed at the end of this document.

The report presents data in relation to:

- 1) Overview of employment status;
- 2) Services received by those currently in work;
- 3) People who are not in work;
- 4) Barriers and enablers to employment.

## **1. Overview of employment status**

### **Overall employment rates**

Employment rate amongst the population of working age people who are registered blind or partially sighted is estimated as 33%. This figure is approximately the same as the estimate based on Network 1000 Survey 1 (2005). In terms of differences across ages, the highest proportion of respondents in employment is found in the 30-49 age group (44%) then the 18-29 group (at 33%) and the lowest proportion in the 50-64 group (only 22%).

People who described themselves as 'long term sick or disabled' are the biggest group within the working aged visually impaired population (36%). Again this is linked with age – 17%, 32% and 45% in the 18-29, 30-49 and 50-64 age groups respectively. The overall proportion of people who described themselves as 'long term sick or disabled' has grown since Survey 1.

As we might expect, respondents in the 18-29 category were much more likely to classify themselves as a student (22%) than in the other two age groups, but also unemployment was higher in this age group (22% compared with around 10% in other age groups, and overall 12%). High proportions of people aged between 50 and 64 years of age described themselves as retired (19%) although they were not old enough to receive a state pension.

The employment rate amongst visually impaired people is very low compared to the general working age population. Overall, three quarters of the general

population reported being in some form of employment (General Household Survey 2006; ONS, 2008). Visually impaired individuals of working age are much more likely to describe themselves as being unemployed, long term sick or disabled, or retired than those in the general population.

### **Factors associated with employment**

The report presents the findings from a regression analysis which examined the net effect of each independent variable on employment status while controlling for other variables. The key variables which were found to be associated with likelihood of being employed were: registration status (blind or partially sighted), educational attainment, and housing tenure. In summary:

- The severity of visual impairment has a significant impact upon likelihood of employment – those who are registered as blind are less likely to be employed than those registered partially sighted.
- Level of educational attainment has a significant impact upon likelihood of employment. People with higher qualifications are significantly more likely to be employed. While age appears to be a key factor in predicting employment in this population it seems that it is educational attainment which has the greater association (in fact the highest association of all the variables examined).
- Housing tenure has a significant association with employment. Those employed are more likely to be buying (or to have bought) their home. This finding most probably reflects the economic advantage of employment.

### **Changes in employment status over time**

A comparison of self-reported employment status across Network 1000 Survey 1 and Survey 2 gives a picture of how things have changed in the 18 months between the surveys. Most notably, the proportion of people who described themselves as unemployed has dropped (20% to 12%) and the proportion of those who described themselves as 'long term sick or disabled' has risen (22% to 36%).

Furthermore, because Network 1000 is a longitudinal study (i.e. the data was collected from the same participants) we are able to track the status of individuals across the two surveys and gain a more dynamic picture of change. In summary:

- Those who are employed tend to stay employed.
- Very few people who are looking for new employment are successful.
- There appears to be a general 'drift' towards 'long term sick or disabled' (self-reported) status amongst those not in work.
- Those who are unemployed tend to either stay unemployed or, more likely, re-categorise themselves as 'long term sick or disabled'.
- Those who describe themselves as retired tend to either stay retired or re-categorise themselves as 'long term sick or disabled'.
- Those who describe themselves as 'long term sick or disabled' most likely remain in this category.

## 2. Services received by those currently in work

In this section of the report the analysis focuses upon visually impaired people of working age who were working at the time of the interview. This gave a sub-sample of 171 people.

### Support when in work

Those participants who were currently in work were asked about the different types of practical support provided by their employer. 89% described receiving some type of support while only 11% reported that they had not received any support. Examples of support received by high proportions of visually impaired employees are:

- 61% of participants had been given time off for medical attention (diagnosis or treatment).
- 59% used special aids or equipment to enable them to carry out their job.
- 45% of participants reported that their employer had arranged adaptations within their work environment.
- 33% of participants had been allowed to change their working hours.
- 65% of participants said they had received support from other staff.

Examples of support which was received by lower proportions of visually impaired employees are:

- 19% reported receiving special training or re-training.
- 17% reported being offered a change of jobs within their company.
- 18% had been in receipt of specialist services such as reading or clerical support.
- 3% of participants reported having taken time off for rehabilitation and adjustment to their visual impairment.
- 10% had been given a specially designed job by their current employer.

These figures become more meaningful if we are able to compare the support experienced by people who are in work to people who are *no longer* in work. The proportion of the 'not working' group who had received support was less in the majority of areas compared to those who were in work. The differences were particularly high (greater than 20%) in relation to 'special aids or equipment to do the job' and 'support from other staff'. In keeping with this, a larger proportion of people no longer in work reported they had received 'no support' compared to those in work (38% and 11% respectively).

Approximately 30% of visually impaired people who were no longer working believed they could have been able to continue in their job if they had been given more support (19% thought this was definitely the case while 11% thought it may be the case). This suggests that significant numbers of visually impaired people who have lost their job feel that they could still be working if they had received more support in relation to their visual impairment.

## **Access to written material when in work**

Visually impaired people reported accessing text in a variety of ways at work. For example:

- Standard print (42% without any low vision aids, 58% with low vision aids).
- Large print on paper (53%) and a computer screen (58%).
- Having someone to read things to them (39%).
- Speech output through computers (21%) and tape / CD digital formats (29%).
- Reading paper-based braille (9%) and braille presented through electronic braille displays (6%).

Flexibility shown by many visually impaired people in the ways in which they access written material was evident. Almost 70% of those questioned reported using three or more of the access methods above (and 47% used four or more), e.g. people using speech output from a computer as well as various forms of print.

## **Getting employed**

Those participants who were working at the time of the interview were asked questions about sources of information and agencies used when seeking employment. The more commonly reported sources of information in job searches were adverts (37%), Job Centres (30%), the internet (19%), and newspapers (11%). The more commonly reported agencies were Job Centre staff (16%) and recruitment and temping agencies (7%). Many people reported that they had not used any agencies (65%). When prompted, 31% described using disability employment officers – of these, three quarters were satisfied with the support they had received.

## **3. People who are not in work**

In this section of the report the analysis focuses upon visually impaired people of working age who were not working at the time of the interview. This includes people who described themselves as unemployed as well as people who described themselves as not being in the labour market – long term sick or disabled, retired, looking after family or home, and students (who were not also working). This gave a sub-sample of working age visually impaired people who are not working of 331 people.

### **Services received by those looking for work**

Participants who were not working at the time of the interview were asked about any training in new skills that they had received:

- Approximately a third of people who were not working (37%) described themselves as having never looked for work whilst they have been visually impaired. Unsurprisingly, the majority of these described themselves as economically inactive (most commonly 'long term sick or disabled').

- A further 38% said they had never been offered training in new skills for a job or other work and again the majority of these described themselves as economically inactive.
- The remaining 25% had been offered retraining by an employer (2%), by Government Employment Services or Job Centres (18%), and/or by a charity (9%).

Those participants who were not working at the time of the interview (and had looked for work whilst visually impaired) were asked questions about sources of information and agencies used when seeking employment. By far the most commonly reported source of information in job searches were Job Centres (34%). Other sources of information reported were RNIB (11%), Action for Blind People (7%), Social Services (6%), and adverts (4%). When prompted, 29% described using disability employment officers – of these 57% were satisfied with the support they had received and 40% were not satisfied.

### **Likelihood of becoming employed**

Participants who described themselves as unemployed (73 people) were asked whether they were currently seeking paid work. Their replies were fairly evenly divided amongst the three response options 'seeking paid work', 'not seeking paid work, but would like it', and 'not seeking paid work and do not want it'.

All participants who were not employed (except students) were asked a standard question about likelihood of obtaining paid work in the next year. On the whole they provided a rather pessimistic forecast about their employment prospects:

- 66% of participants stated that they believed they were 'very unlikely' to obtain paid work in the next year.
- This rises to 90% who believed they were 'very unlikely' or 'unlikely' to obtain paid work in the next year.
- Older participants were more pessimistic about employment than younger participants.
- Participants who are not part of the labour market (largely those who describe themselves as 'long term sick or disabled') were more pessimistic about employment than those who described themselves as unemployed.

## **4. Barriers and enablers to employment**

The final section of the report draws upon more qualitative data and draws out visually impaired people's understanding of their own situation.

### **Participants who were not working**

Individuals who were classified as economically inactive were asked if they would like to work, assuming they could change their circumstances. Overall, the majority of this group (72%) said they would still like to work if they could.

Less than a quarter responded that they would not like to work and 5% were unsure.

Participants who said that they would like a job were asked “What would help you get a job?” and “Put another way, what stops you getting a job?” This generated ideas about perceived barriers and enablers people had to finding employment:

- ‘Individual-based’ or ‘within-person’ barriers were identified by many.
- Over half of the participants identified their visual impairment as a key barrier to employment.
- Other barriers commonly identified were general health issues (36%) and mobility (21%).
- ‘Social-based’ or ‘beyond person’ explanations were less commonly identified.
- Of those that were, they included availability and location of jobs (15%), training and qualifications (16%), transport-related factors (13%), and attitudes of employers (12%).

### **Participants who were working**

The majority of visually impaired people who were working said that they were happy with their job (88% compared with 10% who said they were not happy and 2% who were unsure). A follow-up question asked participants to explain why they felt this way:

- Of those who said they were happy with their job, many gave reasons that one would predict sighted people might give in answer to the same question. This was also true of some of those who were not happy with their job.
- A number of the participants who described themselves as happy also described positive reasons relating to their visual impairment, e.g. understanding, supportive and responsive colleagues, visual impairment was never made into an issue, and the presence of a support worker.
- Even so, some also talked about difficulties they encountered which suggests they need more support in order to do their job more effectively (e.g. in relation to access to information, difficulties getting to work or around the workplace, attitudes of their boss or colleagues, or a lack of understanding and support for their visual impairment).

## Acknowledgments and further information

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The Network 1000 project has generated several reports which present findings in relation to the opinions and circumstances of visually impaired people in Great Britain. These include:

Douglas, G., Corcoran, C., Pavey, S. (2006). *Network 1000. Opinions and circumstances of visually impaired people in Great Britain: Report based on over 1000 interviews*. Birmingham: Visual Impairment Centre for Teaching and Research, School of Education, University of Birmingham.

Douglas, G., Pavey, S., and Corcoran, C. (2008). *Finance and entitlement: Report on Disability Living Allowance, Attendance Allowance, and visually impaired people's general perceptions of their financial circumstances*. Birmingham: Visual Impairment Centre for Teaching and Research, School of Education, University of Birmingham.

Douglas, G., Pavey, S., and Corcoran, C. (2008). *Access to Information, Services and Support for people with Visual Impairment*. Birmingham: Visual Impairment Centre for Teaching and Research, School of Education, University of Birmingham.

Douglas, G., Pavey, S., Clements, B. and Corcoran, C. (2009). *Visually impaired people's access to employment*. Birmingham: Visual Impairment Centre for Teaching and Research, School of Education, University of Birmingham.

These reports can be downloaded from the VISION 2020 UK or VICTAR (University of Birmingham) websites:

[www.vision2020uk.org.uk](http://www.vision2020uk.org.uk)

[www.education.bham.ac.uk/research/victar](http://www.education.bham.ac.uk/research/victar)