

Eye Health and Visual Impairment APPG

Meeting Minutes 22 January 2025

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Date: 22 January 2025

Attendees:

* Keith Valentine, Chief Executive, Fight for Sight
* Evan John, Policy and Public Affairs Advisor, Sense
* Charlie Rashbrook, Internship Coordinator, Thomas Pocklington Trust
* Marsha de Cordova, Chair of the APPG
* Alison McGovern, Minister for Employment
* Stephen Timms, Minister for Social Security and Disability
* Steve Darling, Liberal Democrat Spokesperson for Work and Pensions
* Daniel Francis (Lab, Bexleyheath and Crayford)
* Shokat Adam (Ind, Leicester South)
* James Frith (Lab, Bury North)- came in during the session
* Kate Osamor (Lab, Edmonton and Winchmore Hill)- left during the session
* Richard Baker (Lab, Glenrothes and Mid Fife)- left during the session
1. Opening Statement

# Chair: Marsha de Cordova

* + Welcomed attendees and expressed appreciation for the presence of two ministers.
	+ Highlighted the purpose of the session: for Ministers to hear directly from stakeholders about challenges in employment for blind and partially sighted individuals.
	+ Discussed findings from the APPG’s recent employer attitudes report, which identified

significant barriers to employment for people with sight loss.

* + Emphasised the need for a disability employment strategy and improvements to the Equality Act to drive change.
	+ Introduced the session format, with speakers providing insights followed by a Q&A.
1. Introductions
	* Daniel Francis: MP for Bexleyheath and Crayford
	* Kate Osamor: MP for Edmonton and Winchmore Hill
	* Richard Baker: MP for Glenrothes and Mid Fife
	* Shokat Adam: Independent MP for Leicester South, formerly an optician
	* Steve Darling: MP for Torbay, Liberal Democrat Spokesperson for DWP
2. Speaker Presentations

# Charlie Rashbrook, Internship Coordinator, Thomas Pocklington Trust:

* + Shared personal experiences as a visually impaired professional and the importance of inclusive recruitment.
	+ Discussed the Get Set Progress internship programme, which provides paid internships for blind and partially sighted individuals.
	+ Highlighted the need to increase employer confidence in hiring visually impaired candidates.
	+ Stressed the importance of mentorship, training, and peer support for successful employment outcomes.
	+ Reported that 85 percent of interns secure full-time employment within six months of completing the programme.
	+ Called for more Government departments and MPs to participate in internship schemes to improve employer awareness and participation.
	+ Timms asked: How readily are you able to persuade employers to take more interns? Is it a hard sell, and do you need to provide training to employers?
		- Rashbrook Response: Employers remain hesitant due to lack of awareness. It often takes 12 months of engagement to secure participation. Some organizations require financial incentives to take on interns.

# Keith Valentine, Chief Executive, Fight for Sight:

* + Shared personal journey of navigating employment with sight loss.
	+ Highlighted the transformative potential of technology and AI in breaking employment barriers.
	+ Called for Government investment in accessible technology and raising awareness of existing solutions.
	+ Urged policymakers to support policies that promote talent recognition over disability status in employment settings.
	+ Stressed the need for improvements in the Access to Work scheme, including efficiency and flexibility, as well as expanding to cover advanced assistive technology.
	+ Timms asked: What do you think the Government ought to be doing to maximise the potential of technology for blind and visually impaired people?
		- Valentin Response: Government should focus on investment, communication, and accessibility to ensure assistive technology benefits all workers with disabilities.

# Evan John, Policy and Public Affairs Advisor, Sense

* + Provided insights from research on employment experiences of disabled job seekers.
	+ Identified key barriers, including:
		- Lack of assistive technology in job centres.
		- Insufficient training for work coaches on disability and employment.
		- Backlogs in the Access to Work scheme, preventing timely support for employees.
	+ Recommended urgent Government action to improve support services and employer awareness.
	+ Called for mandatory disability equality training for all work coaches and the provision of assistive technology in job centres.
	+ McGovern asked: What is the one thing you would like every work coach in the country to know when supporting disabled job seekers?
		- John Response: Every work coach should receive disability equality training to improve understanding and guidance for disabled job seekers.
1. Q&A

# Leonie Milliner, Chief Executive, General Optical Council

* + Shared experience as an employer participating in the Get Set Progress internship scheme.
	+ Emphasised the cultural transformation within her organisation due to the programme.
	+ Encouraged fellow employers to embrace inclusion for both ethical and business benefits.
	+ Highlighted the importance of policy incentives for hiring visually impaired individuals.
	+ Timms asked: Can you provide an example of something your organisation learned from hiring visually impaired interns?
		- Milliner Response: Employers gain significant workplace improvements through cultural shifts and increased awareness from hiring visually impaired interns.

# Shokat Adam, MP for Leicester South

* + Question: How confident are blind and partially sighted employees when entering the workforce? Are we preparing them well enough?
		- Valentine Response: Many visually impaired individuals face systemic barriers that make confidence a challenge. More investment in education and technology training is needed to prepare individuals for employment.

# Harshal Kubavat, Trustee, Nystagmus Network:

* + Question: Is the Government considering reviewing the Equality Act 2010 in light of technological advancements and employment needs?
		- Timms Response: The Government is reviewing certain aspects, including the disability pay gap, but is open to further input regarding technological inclusion.

# Carla-Rose Hardman, Royal Society for Blind Children

* + Question: How will blind and partially sighted people be supported through the Connect to Work scheme given that it has been largely subcontracted to local authorities and private contractors?
		- McGovern Response : The Government is committed to reviewing local and specialised support to ensure effective employment assistance.
1. Closing Remarks

# Chair: Marsha de Cordova

* + Expressed appreciation for the contributions from speakers and attendees.
	+ Acknowledged the challenges raised and emphasised the importance of continued advocacy and policy reform.
	+ Encouraged ongoing collaboration between government, employers, and disability organisations to drive meaningful change.