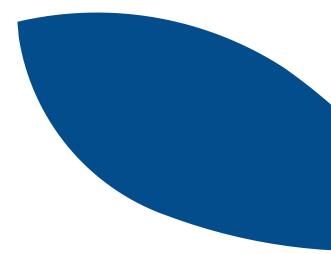


POLITICAL INTELLIGENCE

Eye Health and Visual Impairment APPG

Meeting Minutes

22 January 2025







Eye Health and Visual Impairment APPG Meeting Minutes

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.

2. 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

3. 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:
 - o Lack of assistive technology in job centres.
 - o 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.

4. 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.

5. 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.