



**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:
  - 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.

#### 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.