

## **FINANCE COMMITTEE**

### **DEMOGRAPHIC CHANGE AND AGEING POPULATION INQUIRY**

#### **SUBMISSION FROM ACTION ON HEARING LOSS SCOTLAND AND RNIB SCOTLAND**

##### **About us**

1. Action on Hearing Loss Scotland (formerly RNID Scotland) is the charity working for a world where hearing loss doesn't limit or label people, where tinnitus is silenced and where people value and look after their hearing.

2. RNIB Scotland is the leading charity working with blind and partially sighted people in Scotland. As a membership organisation, we are dedicated to delivering services our members need and campaigning for their civil and welfare rights. We support children and adults with sight loss to live full and independent lives.

##### **Deafness and hearing loss**

3. Currently, there are 850,000 people who are deaf or hard of hearing in Scotland. That is 1 in 6 of the population. There are many reasons why some people are deaf or hard of hearing or lose their hearing. The most common is age-related deafness, with more than 50 per cent of people over the age of 60 with some degree of hearing loss. Other people may lose their hearing because of exposure to noise at work or because of prolonged and repeated exposure to loud music. Deafness can be congenital, and Universal Newborn Hearing Screening, introduced in Scotland in 2005, is identifying more deaf babies than ever before. There are also some conditions such as damage to the eardrum or inflammation in the middle ear that cause deafness. There is a broad spectrum of levels of a hearing loss, ranging from people with mild deafness to people who are profoundly deaf.

##### **Blindness and sight loss**

4. At present, around 36,000 people are formally registered as blind or partially sighted in Scotland, but the true total is estimated to be around 180,000 Scots with sight loss. It is also estimated that there are 1,000 to 2,000 young people in Scotland with sight loss, and people with learning disabilities are especially vulnerable: of the 120,000 people in Scotland who have a learning disability, at least 30 per cent will have significant undetected sight loss. And with 228,000 Scots affected by diabetes, diabetic retinopathy is now the leading cause of blindness among the working-age population. Someone with diabetes has a 10 to 20 times greater chance of being registered blind. However, early diagnosis and treatment can prevent up to 98 per cent of severe sight loss.

##### **Demographic change and sensory loss**

5. By 2031, it is projected that the number of people with hearing loss in Scotland will rise from 850,000 to around 1.2 million. Similarly, the number of people with sight loss (without intervention beyond the current provision) is expected to double from around 180,000 to almost 400,000. Both increases are mainly due to a large rise in the elderly population but a variety of health factors, such as Scotland's persistently poor health record, also play a part.

6. Additionally, it is likely that there will be a significant increase in the number of people who suffer from both sight and hearing loss - people who have a joint sensory impairment. Again, the increase in the number of older people is expected to be at the root of this growing problem.

7. The expected increase in the number of people with sight and/or hearing loss will mean a corresponding increase in demand for services to prevent and treat hearing and sight problems as well as for services to support those with sensory loss to live independently.

8. The annual cost of sight loss per person is around £17,646 - roughly equivalent to ten hospital admissions. Of this, £5,451 is costs to the public sector. In total, sight loss conditions cost the NHS and the public sector in Scotland a minimum estimated cost of £194 million a year, plus £434 million more in terms of broader costs to the economy and to society (it should be noted that this figure does not include the recent additional cost of new wet AMD treatments). This total cost is projected to rise by around £120 million a year.

9. We believe that maintaining investment in things such as free eye-tests, which can pick up early danger signals, will lead to cost savings in years to come. We also believe that similar savings could potentially be made through the introduction of a hearing screening programme.

10. If hearing loss is addressed soon after a problem is first noticed, the person has a better chance to benefit early on from any necessary adjustments, such as getting hearing aids and/or attending a lip-reading class.

11. Evidence suggests there is currently a 10-year delay in people seeking help for their hearing loss. There are about 160,000 people who have a hearing aid in Scotland, but around 500,000 people could benefit from hearing aids – leaving about 340,000 people who need them but do not yet have them.

## **Conclusion**

12. Both the number of people with hearing loss and the number of people with sight loss in Scotland are projected to increase significantly over the next 20 years. This rise is mainly due to a large rise in the proportion of older people in Scotland's population. Additionally, we can also expect a rise in the number of people with a joint sensory impairment – this means people who suffer from both a sight and a hearing loss.

13. These increases are likely to lead to additional demands on public services (particularly the NHS and local authorities) as a larger number of people need to access diagnosis, treatment and support services.