

Cross-Party Group on Visual Impairment Minutes, AGM and meeting, Wednesday 24 September 2025, 13.00-14.15, online and Committee Room 1, Scottish Parliament

Present – attending in person

MSPs

1. Neil Bibby MSP
2. Sarah Boyack MSP
3. Pam Duncan-Glancy MSP

Invited guests

1. Kaukab Stewart MSP, Minister for Equalities
2. Laura Walker, Vice-Chair, Vision Collaborative Scotland

Observers

1. Jack Donald, Disability Benefits Policy Unit, Scottish Government

Non-MSP Group Members

1. James Adams, RNIB Scotland
2. Catriona Burness, RNIB Scotland
3. Gillian Hallard, RNIB Scotland
4. Kirstie Henderson, RNIB Scotland
5. Maureen MacMillan, Highland Blindcraft Sensory Services
6. Jo MacQueen, RNIB Scotland
7. Peter Sanders, Office of Neil Bibby MSP
8. Alan Stewart, RNIB Scotland Advisory Group
9. Hannah Tweed, The ALLIANCE - Scottish Sensory Hub
10. Joanna Zawadzka, Sight Scotland, and Sight Scotland Veterans

Present – attending online

MSPs - attending online

N/A

Invited guests – attending online

1. Eilidh Thomson, Chair, Optometry Scotland

Observers – attending online

1. Karen Mowat, Scottish Government
2. Mike Stewart, Scottish Government

Non-MSP Group Members – attending online

1. Deirdre Aitken, Highland Blindcraft Sensory Services
2. Jayne Brown, Forth Valley Sensory Centre
3. Steve Brown, Roche
4. Niall Foley, Guide Dogs Scotland
5. Claire Forde, RNIB Scotland Advisory Group
6. Pauline Gibson, Hearing and Sight Car
7. Laura Jones, RNIB Scotland
8. Lisa Kelly
9. Iona McLean, Macular Society
10. Julie Ritchie, Deafblind Scotland
11. Brenda Rennie, Association of British Dispensing Opticians
12. Terry Robinson
13. Danny Sweeney
14. Colette Walker

Apologies

1. Jeremy Balfour MSP
2. Mark Ballard, Sight Scotland, and Sight Scotland Veterans
3. Claire Black, NHS Education for Scotland
4. Miles Briggs MSP
5. Tanya Castell, RNIB Trustee
6. Eileen Clarkson, RNIB Scotland
7. Graham Findlay, Thomas Pocklington Trust
8. Raquel Garrido-Soriano, Visionary
9. Isabelle Goldie, Deafblind Scotland
10. Colin Hilditch, Sight Scotland, and Scottish Braille Press
11. Thelma Ingram
12. David Mckerrall
13. Stuart McMillan MSP
14. Dan Meikle, RNIB Scotland
15. Michael Moore, Guide Dogs Scotland
16. Eilidh Morrison, Scottish Youth Parliament
17. Rod Murchison

18. Sally Paterson, Vision Support Service, Aberdeen City Council
19. Hussein Patwa
20. Nicoletta Primo, Sight Scotland and Sight Scotland Veterans
21. Mary Rasmussen
22. Professor John Ravenscroft, University of Edinburgh
23. Allan Russell, RNIB Connect Radio
24. Lewis Shaw, The ALLIANCE - Scottish Sensory Hub
25. Susan Shippey, Sight Scotland, and Sight Scotland Veterans
26. Sue Webber MSP
27. Jacquie Winning, Forth Valley Sensory Centre

Cross-Party Group in the Scottish Parliament on Visual Impairment

#CPGVI

Purpose of the group

The Cross-Party Group on Visual Impairment draws together the blind and partially sighted sector in Scotland to identify issues competent to the Scottish Parliament and seeks, in a reasonable fashion, to influence policy, legislation and decision makers to better reflect the needs of blind and partially sighted people.

Agenda

Agenda item 1 - Welcome, introductions, and apologies

The Convener Stuart McMillan sent apologies due to his attendance at the Scottish Parliament Conveners Group. Vice-Convener Neil Bibby MSP chaired the meeting (apart from the AGM). He welcomed everyone to the meeting and read out the GDPR statement. Individuals who do not wished to be named in the minutes should let the Secretary Catriona Burness know as they will otherwise appear on public record.

Agenda item 2 – Annual General Meeting (AGM) and Election of Office Bearers

Sarah Boyack MSP took the chair for the AGM and proceeded with nominations and election of Office Bearers of the CPGVI. Nominations and approvals were as follows:

Convener

Nominated: Stuart McMillan MSP

Proposer: Neil Bibby MSP
Seconder: Sarah Boyack MSP

Vice-Convener

Nominated: Neil Bibby MSP
Proposer: Alan Stewart
Seconder: Terry Robinson

Secretariat

Nominated: RNIB Scotland – Catriona Burness
Proposer: Terry Robinson
Seconder: Sarah Boyack MSP

After the AGM, Neil Bibby MSP returned to the chair.

Agenda item 3 - Approval of minutes of meeting of 27 May 2025

Proposer: Maureen MacMillian
Seconder: Alan Stewart
The minutes were approved.

Agenda item 4 – Matters Arising and Action Points

Due to time constraints these were taken at the end of the meeting.

Agenda item 5 – Ms Kaukab Stewart MSP, Minister for Equalities – Social security in Scotland

Ms Kaukab Stewart MSP, Minister for Equalities, presented to the CPGVI in place of the Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice who was unable to attend the meeting. Her presentation covered the Scottish Government's progress in delivering a social security system responsible for several key devolved benefits.

A full transcript of her presentation was provided for circulation to the CPG members. Brief points for the purpose of the minutes include:

- The Scottish social security system is based on the values of dignity, fairness, and respect.
- Several disability benefits are now delivered by Social Security Scotland. A compassionate approach to disability benefits is deliberately designed to ensure as many disabled people as

possible, including blind and partially sighted people, get the help that they need and are entitled to.

- In August, a major milestone was achieved - everyone in Scotland who was receiving Personal Independence Payment (PIP), almost 350,000 disabled people, have had their benefit award safely and successfully transferred to Adult Disability Payment (ADP).
- Scotland's approach to delivering social security has ensured those receiving PIP prior to the introduction of ADP would not need to re-apply for their benefits or experience a break in entitlement.
- Many disabled people and organisations representing them have had some involvement in the policy design and development of disability assistance in Scotland.
- Edel Harris OBE has now reported on the Independent Review of Adult Disability Payment (ADP) with a series of recommendations. The report provided positive examples of how the Scottish based system of administering and delivering disability assistance differs from others. The report made a series of recommendations. The Scottish Government will respond to these early in 2026.
- The Scottish Government seeks to make the case for investing in the people of Scotland through the social security system, including making financial support more straightforward to access.

Ms Stewart spoke about potential challenges posed by possible UK Government changes to the reserved welfare system. She stated the Scottish Government remains committed to representing the views and concerns of disabled people, including blind and partially sighted people, in communications with the UK Government.

Neil Bibby thanked Ms Stewart for her presentation and opened the meeting up to questions from those in attendance.

Q and A

Question 1: James Adams noted the statutory right to inclusive communications and accessible information, as enshrined in Social Security legislation in Scotland and asked whether this right will be extended across the public sector.

Answer: Ms Stewart said there was an appetite to pursue this through the Public Sector Equality Duty (PSED). She wants to see inclusive communication embedded consistently across all 32 local authorities, as well as in the portfolios of all 14 Cabinet Secretaries in Scotland to ensure there is capacity to deliver this.

An Inclusive Communications toolkit has been commissioned to support organisations in delivering inclusive communications, across different demographics. The toolkit will be issued to all public sector organisations with templates included to deliver all forms of inclusive communication.

Question 2: Hannah Tweed asked whether there will be evaluation of use of the toolkit.

Answer: Ms Stewart said the Scottish Government wants to support robust monitoring and evaluation of the toolkit. She also recognises the importance of monitoring to ensure the policy is implemented. She would like to strengthen the role of government ministers to ensure the public sector fulfils its obligations under Equality Impact Assessments (EQiAs) and the PSED. This is vital for ministerial overview and to ensure there is more accountability.

The regulations for this are being worked through at present. Whilst there are funding pressures within local authorities which can impact on delivery, it is hoped the toolkit will enable services to deliver on Inclusive Communications.

Question 3: Sarah Boyack MSP cited recent research by the Cross-Party Group on Transport on the need for accessibility across all public transport services and associated infrastructure.

Answer: Ms Stewart has discussed this with the Cabinet Secretary for Transport. She gave the example of the pilot project offering free companion rail travel for those with a blind person's rail card. The launch event for this initiative took place at the recently refurbished Anniesland Railway Station, where tactile paving has been installed on platforms, with colour contrast used around the station environment. She recognised it will take time to ensure transport infrastructure is inclusive for all, but it is a key aim.

She also noted work to raise awareness of the Inclusive Communications toolkit and equality duties with Director Generals to promote use of the training available. Over 1,000 people have gone through this training – it is hoped this will embed a culture of accessibility from the outset.

Neil Bibby thanked Ms Stewart for her presentation and for her responses to questions.

Agenda Item 6 – Eilidh Thomson, Chair, Optometry Scotland – National Eye Health Week 2025

Eilidh Thomson is a Community Independent Prescriber and optometrist working in a community optometry practice in NHS Lothian. She has been a member of Optometry Scotland's board since 2019 and has served as Chair of the organisation since September 2024.

Optometry Scotland is the national representative organisation for the optometry sector in Scotland, dedicated to advocating for optometrists, dispensing opticians, and optical practices throughout the country.

It is almost 20 years since Scotland introduced universal NHS funded eye tests. Scotland remains the only part of the UK to provide this service.

National Eye Health Week (22-28 September 2025) is an important opportunity to raise awareness about the importance of accessing free NHS funded eye examinations. Eye-tests may help prevent avoidable sight loss with early detection of eye conditions and other health issues.

Eilidh Thomson outlined the role of Community Optometrists and the development of the Community Glaucoma Service. This has been introduced so that patients can be discharged from hospital into community-based services. This also offers patients with glaucoma a more streamlined service based in their community, as opposed to having to go through lots of separate tests within eye clinics.

So far, around 1,000 patients have been discharged to their Community Glaucoma Service and there is capacity for up to 20,000 more patients to be discharged into this type of service. Optometry Scotland are working with the Scottish Government and secondary care services to identify patients so they can be discharged into these services. This development frees up hospital capacity and reduces waiting times for eye appointments. This is key to reducing the deterioration of vision for many patients.

The National Low Vision Service has not yet come to fruition. However, it is hoped Community Optometrists and Dispensing Opticians will be available to serve people registered as severely sight impaired at home and in their own communities. Optometry Scotland is keen to work with others and raise awareness so that every health board in Scotland has a service like this.

Q and A

Question 1: Sarah Boyack MSP asked if information about the numbers who could potentially benefit from this service in each health board could be made available. This would enable MSPs and other elected representatives to lobby health boards which currently don't have provision.

Question 2: Maureen MacMillan suggested the voluntary sector could be ideally placed to deliver and/or coordinate this type of community-based service. However, they have often had difficulties attracting funding and service provision seems a bit disjointed.

Answer: Eilidh Thomson agreed with this point and noted the postcode lottery which currently exists for eyecare services.

Neil Bibby said that due to a range of factors, not everyone gets their eyes tested regularly. This is why promotion of National Eye Health Week is vital to raise awareness of the right to free eye examinations in Scotland noting the Scottish Government and Scottish Parliament's role in promoting this during Eye Health Week as well as throughout the year.

Action 6.1

Eilidh Thomson agreed to provide some information relating to glaucoma treatment.

Agenda item 7 – Laura Walker, Vice-Chair, Vision Collaborative Scotland – The future of vision rehabilitation services in Scotland

Laura Walker outlined the goal to promote the right to vision rehabilitation for anyone who needs it, noting the current disparity of provision across the country.

She underlined that vision rehabilitation plays a key role in supporting people with no or low vision. It enables people to gain new skills across various aspects of daily life, including within employment, education, or general navigation skills.

A survey by the Scottish Sensory Hub in 2021 found over 50 per cent of the Vision Rehabilitation/Habitation Workforce across Scotland are over 50 years old. The ageing workforce and the lack of a qualification pathway in Scotland prompted a consortium of sight loss organisations to form the Scottish Vision Strategy Steering Group (SVSSG). The

Steering Group aimed to reinstate the Graduate Low Vision Rehabilitation Course at Glasgow Caledonian University, thereby increasing the numbers of qualified Rehabilitation Officers across Scotland. The course was reinstated for a one-off cohort in January 2023. Funding enabled a 50 per cent subsidy of course fees and 19 people graduated in July 2024.

It is estimated that around 183,000 people live with sight loss in Scotland. The long-term commitment of the renamed SVSSG, now called Vision Collaborative Scotland, is to deliver long term transformative change, to ensure there is equitable access to vision rehabilitation specialists across Scotland, and that the profession can become regulated.

Two vision rehabilitation courses are being launched at the University of Strathclyde in January 2026. The first course is a two-year, part-time, blended learning programme leading to a Postgraduate Diploma. It will enable individuals to qualify as Vision Rehabilitation Specialists and take up employment in a sector that urgently needs skilled professionals. The second course is a one-year, part-time, blended learning programme at Postgraduate Certificate level. This will boost the workforce of vision rehabilitation practitioners in Scotland. The fact the courses can be delivered remotely, with training and assessment centres available throughout Scotland, will help ensure coverage across the country.

The Vision Rehabilitation Collaborative will also ask every political party to make a commitment to realise the right to rehabilitation at the 2026 Scottish Parliament Elections.

Laura Walker also referred to research being conducted by the University of Melbourne and Glasgow Caledonian University on the impact of vision rehabilitation. Early research findings are positive while Vision Collaborative Scotland is also seeking to map vision rehabilitation across Scotland.

Neil Bibby thanked Ms Walker for her presentation and opened to questions from attendees.

Q and A

Question 1: James Adams noted achievements which have been made and commended the Vision Collaborative Scotland initiative for making progress in this area.

Question 2: Brenda Rennie offered support from the Association of British Dispensing Opticians and asked when the course information will be made available so that they could help with promotion.

Answer: Laura Walker said the University of Strathclyde course will be promoted in the next few weeks.

Question 3: Deirdre Aitken congratulated Vision Collaborative Scotland on the creation of the course at the University of Strathclyde and asked if funding would be available for students wanting to apply to the course.

Answer: Student Award Agency for Scotland (SAWS) funding will be available to eligible students who are offered a place on the course.

Action 7.1

Laura Walker will provide information on the Strathclyde postgraduate course for circulation to the CPG members.

Agenda item 4 - Matters arising and Action Points

A report on CPG Action Points was circulated along with the minutes. Many points relate to ongoing correspondence.

The CPG will invite the Cabinet Secretary for Transport to attend a future meeting. It remains to be seen what approach will be taken in Scotland on bus stop design. The UK Bus Bill will receive royal assent shortly and contains amendments relating to bus stop design in England.

In relation to correspondence on the cancellation of the See Hear Strategy, the Convener Stuart McMillan MSP will take this forward with Tom Arthur MSP, the Minister for Social Care and Mental Wellbeing.

Catriona Burness reported that the Electoral Commission (Scotland) is keen to speak to the December CPG meeting about guidance on assistance for disabled voters for Returning Officers.

Agenda Item 8 - Any other competent business

None.

Agenda item 9 - Date of next meeting

Tuesday 2 December 2025, 18.00-19.30

Neil Bibby thanked everyone for their contributions and closed the meeting.