

# **Cross-Party Group on Visual Impairment**

## **Tuesday 2 December 2025, 18.00-19.45, via Teams**

### **Minutes**

#### **Present:**

1. Neil Bibby MSP
2. Stuart McMillan MSP

#### **Invited guests**

1. Edel Harris OBE, Chair, Independent Review of Adult Disability Payment
2. Emma Swift, Electoral Commission (Scotland)

#### **Observers**

1. Ellie May Garnish

#### **Non-MSP Group Members**

1. James Adams, RNIB Scotland
2. Deirdre Aitken, Highland Blindcraft Sensory Services
3. Salena Begley, Family Fund
4. Claire Black, NHS Education for Scotland
5. Catriona Burness, RNIB Scotland
6. Eileen Clarkson, RNIB Scotland
7. Eamonn Dunne, Thomas Pocklington Trust
8. Niall Foley, Guide Dogs Scotland
9. Claire Forde, RNIB Scotland Advisory Group
10. Raquel Garrido-Soriano, Visionary
11. Pauline Gibson, Hearing and Sight Care
12. Gillian Hallard, RNIB Scotland
13. Sheila Hands, NHS Tayside
14. Kirstie Henderson, RNIB Scotland
15. Maureen MacMillan, Highland Blindcraft Sensory Services
16. Christopher McKiddie, Audio Description Association Scotland
17. Iona McLean, Macular Society
18. Mary Rasmussen

19. Brenda Rennie, Association of British Dispensing Opticians
20. Julie Ritchie, Deafblind Scotland
21. Kirin Saeed
22. Lewis Shaw, The ALLIANCE - Scottish Sensory Hub
23. Alan Stewart, RNIB Scotland Advisory Group
24. Danny Sweeney
25. Hannah Tweed, The ALLIANCE - Scottish Sensory Hub
26. Colette Walker
27. Jacque Winning, Forth Valley Sensory Centre
28. Joanna Zawadzka, Sight Scotland, and Sight Scotland Veterans

## **Apologies**

1. Mark Ballard, Sight Scotland, and Sight Scotland Veterans
2. Sarah Boyack MSP
3. Miles Briggs MSP
4. Tanya Castell, RNIB Trustee
5. Kate Charles, Vision PK
6. Jack Donald, Disability Benefits Policy Unit, Scottish Government
7. Graham Findlay, Thomas Pocklington Trust
8. Colin Hilditch, Sight Scotland, and Scottish Braille Press
9. Thelma Ingram
10. Margaret Jackson, RNIB Scotland
11. Laura Jones, RNIB Scotland
12. Matthew Leitch, Office of Stuart McMillan MSP
13. Jo MacQueen, RNIB Scotland
14. Carla Marchbank, NESS
15. David Mckerral
16. Dan Meikle, RNIB Scotland
17. Karen Mowat, Scottish Government
18. Rod Murchison
19. Joanne O'Hanlon, Optometry Scotland
20. Sally Paterson, Vision Support Service, Aberdeen City Council
21. Hussein Patwa
22. Nicoletta Primo, Sight Scotland and Sight Scotland Veterans
23. Professor John Ravenscroft, University of Edinburgh
24. Terry Robinson
25. Allan Russell, Connect Radio
26. Susan Shippey, Sight Scotland, and Sight Scotland Veteran

## **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**

Stewart McMillan MSP welcomed everyone to the meeting and noted the decision to move the meeting online as the numbers of those certain to attend in person fell below ten. Our apologies for any inconvenience caused.

He read out the GDPR statement:

The names of individual members are listed on the CPG website alongside the list of organisation members. The parliament's guidance states that "The name of an individual is considered to be personal data so if you are holding the names of those attending CPG meetings and minutes of what was said, then those minutes include personal data." The names of CPG attendees will be on the public record of the meeting. If anyone does not wish their name to appear on any publicly available CPG documents, please let the Secretary know.

### **Meeting etiquette**

In the room – speakers at the table to use the microphones to ensure they can be heard and to switch the mike off after contributions.

Teams - use hands up to indicate wish to speak. Please make succinct contributions and minimise use of chat function as chat messages are read out for JAWS users making it difficult for them to follow speakers.

### **Agenda item 2 - Approval of minutes of meeting of 24 September 2025**

Proposer: Neil Bibby, MSP

Seconder: Alan Stewart

The minutes were approved.

### **Agenda item 3 - Matters arising and Action Points**

A note on action points was circulated with the mailing that announced that the CPG would take place online. Please note that some of the points are carried over. The Secretary can respond to any queries but under AOCB to allow time for our speakers.

### **Agenda item 4 – The Independent Review of Adult Disability Payment, Edel Harris, OBE:**

Stuart MacMillan welcomed Edel Harris OBE to the meeting and gave a brief description of her background.

Edel Harris OBE served as the Chief Executive Officer of Mencap, one of the UK's largest disability charities from 2019-2023. Prior to this, Edel spent eleven years as the CEO of Cornerstone Community Care, a disability social care provider based in Scotland. In February 2024, Edel was appointed as Chair of the Scottish Government's Independent Review into Adult Disability Payment (ADP), delivering her final report in July 2025.

Edel gave an overview of this process and referenced findings from the Independent Review of ADP which are relevant to people with vision impairments. Key points from her presentation are noted below:

- The summary report captures some of the main findings and recommendations from the report. This is an accessible PDF and can be accessed via the Scottish Government's website. The full report is around 180 pages long.
- The publication of the review's findings marks a significant milestone with ongoing efforts to ensure ADP meets the needs of disabled people in Scotland, as well as those with long term health conditions (LHTC).
- The independence of the review was welcomed by many organisations who fed into the review on behalf of those they work with.
- Recommendations from the review seek to build positive foundations so the claims process for ADP is fair, transparent, and supportive.
- Many people she spoke to were positive about their experiences of dealing with the devolved benefits system via Social Security Scotland (SSS), when comparing this to the Personal Independence Payment (PIP) process, which is delivered by Department for Work and Pensions (DWP). They highlighted

interactions based on respect and welcomed not having face-to-face assessments as part of the claims process unless these are required due to lack of supporting information.

- The review includes recommendations to improve the overall client experience and ensure timely decisions are made. The review also looked at the eligibility criteria and assessment for ADP. This includes looking at descriptors and activities used, which are currently taken from the PIP assessment framework.
- The recommendations seek to build a modern, realistic, outcomes focussed assessment for the benefit of recipients.
- It is up to the Scottish Government to decide which recommendations they will implement. These include system and policy recommendations such as updates to guidance and training for staff. These can be achieved relatively quickly, and at a relatively low cost, others will involve recurring spending. It is difficult to estimate the full costs of certain changes as available data is limited.
- More evidence is required to show decision makers why investment in social security benefits and disability benefits can benefit the wider economy.
- The recommendations seek to embed a human rights approach as opposed to making decisions on how much they will cost.
- She also noted the rising numbers of benefit recipients and financial limitations of being reliant on the Block Grant Adjustment (BGA) from UK Government.
- Ultimately, social security is an investment in the people of Scotland. This is already outlined in Social Security Scotland's Charter.
- Edel Harris spoke to people with vision impairments across Scotland as part of the review via a range of methods, including surveys, meetings and she referred to evidence presented by RNIB Scotland.
- She highlighted the role of technology in the context of mobility and how this needs careful consideration. Whilst some people with sight loss can use mobile phone technology and navigation software, it might not be possible for everyone. Online and paper-based application forms were also mentioned. Some welcomed online application forms but highlighted the need for accessible systems for people using assistive technology.
- Mobility was also mentioned in the context of the Planning and Following a Journey activity in ADP. The review findings

recognises that the ADP system must account for differences in lived experience and not assume uniform universal capacity.

- Other feedback from people with vision impairments noted the difficulties in using descriptors to assess the “moving around” activity which is based on a fixed distance (that is, 20 metres).
- Recommendations suggest this should be replaced with an assessment which looks at the whole life experience, including where a person lives, access to public transport, amenities and journeys undertaken. This could take guidance from the Blue Badge Assessment in Scotland, but this is not a specific recommendation.
- The application form for ADP also received feedback - some appreciated the font size and more detailed guidance. Others liked the use of pictures to help understand activities in the form. However, access issues with using online systems, for example uploading supporting information online, creating log-in details and passwords, can cause difficulties.
- The importance of receiving accessible information including audio, large print, braille was highlighted.
- Some would prefer more communication throughout the application process for ADP, so they know what is happening with their claim. Others noted it took a long time to get a decision on their ADP claim, which can heighten feelings of anxiety.
- This was also highlighted via feedback in Social Security Scotland’s client survey.

The Convener thanked Edel for her presentation and opened the meeting up to questions.

## **Questions**

Question 1: Sheila Hands noted that accessibility issues with SSS’s Client Survey could limit feedback from those who could not access it. She also asked whether it is intended to look at the length of awards for people with vision impairments, citing various changes to this through the years because of welfare reforms.

Answer: SSS send out surveys to those who receive ADP but also noted methods for feedback on an ongoing basis must be accessible. As the Chair of an independent review, Edel cannot represent SSS, but she is confident that if the CPG Secretariat contacted them, they would be able to provide more information.

The ADP review looked at the length of awards in detail, particularly where a condition is unlikely to improve. It was suggested long term awards could be looked at, but she also cited the rationale from SSS for not adopting this approach considering the impact of a person's condition on their life rather than their diagnosis. However, she did "shadow" several case managers where health and social care practitioners who make decisions would grant longer term awards (such as up to ten years).

#### **Action 4.1**

To seek clarity from SSS on how it gains feedback on an ongoing basis and methods used to gather this.

Question 2: Selena Begley asked if feedback from families or young people was included in the review to highlight experiences of transitioning onto ADP from Child Disability Payment (CDP) or claiming ADP for the first time.

Answer: The experience of people in receipt of CDP was out of scope of the review. However, she heard from some parents and/or carers of children who were waiting for a benefits decision. She also noted a lack of awareness about ADP amongst some families and carers.

Question 3: Stuart McMillan asked how many people were engaged with as part of the review.

Answer: The actual number of people engaged in the review is included in the report. She also spoke to specific groups such as those representing carers, Black and Ethnic Minority groups, people affected by eating disorders, and people affected by long COVID.

Follow up point from Stuart McMillan: he noted a change in local advocacy provision in his constituency citing the importance of people being able to access this service through a range of methods.

EH noted the contract to provide advocacy at the time of the ADP review was awarded to the organisation Voice Ability. She also mentioned the Local Delivery Service which is available to support people through the process. She saw how important this support is but noted a lack of awareness about these services. The report recommendations address lack of awareness of services.

Question/Point 4: Gillian Hallard mentioned training delivered via RNIB

to SSS decision makers around sight loss and eye conditions. This focussed on ADP. More awareness sessions are being planned for SSS staff working on Child Disability Payment (CDP) and Pension Age Disability Payment (PADP).

Answer: Edel Harris was pleased to hear this is happening. Another recommendation highlights the importance of training from specialist organisations in the third sector who can provide awareness and insight into different conditions.

Question/point 5:

Lewis Shaw noted that Advice Direct Scotland will be taking over the contract to deliver advocacy to people claiming SSS benefits in the New Year, and how some people might not be aware of this.

He also spoke about the assessment used for the moving around activity within ADP, suggesting distance is not appropriate for certain people – particularly when people live in rural locations and public transport is limited.

Stuart McMillan thanked Edel Harris for responding to questions.

#### **Action 4.2**

The Secretary will re-circulate the full set of ADP Review findings (including the easy read version) to the CPGVI mailing list.

#### **Agenda item 5 – 2026 Scottish Parliament Election**

Stuart welcomed Emma Swift to the meeting. She is the Scotland Support Officer at the Electoral Commission (Scotland), based in Edinburgh. Her update included information on the Commission's public awareness activities ahead of the Scottish Parliament election in 2026.

An overview of key points from Emma's presentation is below:

- The Electoral Commission is an independent body which oversees elections and ensures there is confidence and integrity in the election process. This includes guidance to the Candidates standing in elections as well as Returning Officers on their responsibility to deliver elections.
- In the run up to the Scottish Parliament elections on 7 May 2026, the Electoral Commission will be delivering a public awareness campaign to encourage people to register to vote. They hope to target under-registered groups who may have not voted before.

This will include information on how to vote via a range of methods, for example in-person at a polling station, via proxy or via a postal vote.

- Key messages will be targeted to certain groups including those who have never registered, people who have moved house, or changed their name.
- There are strict deadlines to apply for different methods of casting a vote. The deadline for receiving new applications to vote by proxy (not postal proxy or emergency proxies) will be 28 April 2026.
- Other key messages in public awareness campaigns will include:
  - How the ballot paper works in Scottish Parliament elections, including the use of two ballot papers.
  - Help available at the polling station from staff, including equipment.
  - Ensuring people know they can request adaptations or equipment in advance which can assist them when casting their vote from their Electoral Office in their local authority area.
  - No need for Voter ID for Scottish Parliament elections.

There will be a booklet going to all households in Scotland on the elections in May – this is likely to be happening from 23 March 2026 onwards. It can be made available in alternative formats including audio, braille, large print, and easy read. A short video will also accompany this. There will be further materials available to share on social media for organisations to send to their members.

Emma spoke about the updated Guidance for Returning Officers which is due to be published very soon. This includes guidance on types of equipment which can make it easier for disabled people to vote secretly and independently at elections, as well as roles and responsibilities for polling station staff. This follows consultation responses and feedback from the 2024 UK General Election. Some case studies of approaches which have been used successfully are included in the guidance.

### **Action 5.1**

Catriona Burness will circulate the Guidance for Returning Officers when available to CPGVI mailing list.

## **Action 5.2**

When further information on the Scottish Parliament elections from the Electoral Commission is available this will also be sent to those on the mailing list.

Stuart thanked Emma for her presentation and opened the meeting up to questions.

## **Questions**

Question 1: Stuart McMillan asked if all Returning Officers would attend information sessions about the pending updated guidance.

Answer: Emma Swift said representatives from every election office attended a recent joint conference hosted the Electoral Commission and Electoral Management Board for Scotland which covered accessibility.

Question 2: Selena Begley asked about hosting information sessions about upcoming elections.

Answer: The Electoral Commission mainly use online resources but have collaborated with the Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations (SCVO) to deliver some specialised sessions on rules for non-party campaigners. She said she'd be happy for her email to be shared if networks would benefit from information sessions.

## **Action 5.3**

Emma's email to be shared amongst CPGVI mailing list to explore further opportunities to share information.

Question 3: Jacquie Winning mentioned proactive action in the Forth Valley areas, including feedback from people with hearing loss and/or sight loss at the Forth Valley Sensory Centre (FVSC). This included focus groups to trial election information materials to ensure they are fit for purpose. She mentioned further work including a short video to be used as part of awareness raising campaign. With the Electoral Commission's permission, she would be happy to share this video wider.

Question 4: Sheila Hands noted that elections are problematic for people with sight loss for many reasons – for instance, getting to polling stations due to street obstructions. People may require assistance with the tactile polling card overlay as the length of these can vary and candidates are labelled by number, not name. She also asked who has responsibility to enforce the guidance for Returning Officers.

She also made a point about ensuring all election officers know how to incorporate Inclusive Communications into elections. It would be helpful if there was a national register of people with access requirements, so individuals don't have to repeat their needs time and time again to public bodies/organisations.

Answer: Emma Swift noted that Returning Officers have a duty to implement new guidance.

Question/point 5: Deirdre Aitken spoke about the trial of ballot paper overlays and spoken ballot papers at recent Highland Council elections. Council officials had visited Highland Blindcraft to discuss new voting aids. However, she also highlighted that there seems to be a bit of a lottery in terms of who is aware of different measures and how to implement them.

Answer: Emma Swift said where trials have already taken place the local elections office should be aware of this and therefore understand implementation of the guidance.

Question 6: Alan Stewart referred to his involvement in some of the focus group sessions and trials of new voting aids and asked about what will be in the guidance.

Answer: Emma Swift stated that the Electoral Management Board for Scotland have an accessibility sub-group which is working closely with Scottish Government on technical solutions. Some adaptations will be available for the 2026 Scottish Parliament elections, but it is likely this work will be ongoing as different solutions will work for different groups of people.

The Convener thanked Emma Swift for her presentation and for responding to the points and questions raised.

## **Agenda Item 6 - Any other competent business**

### **6.1. Action points report**

There are outstanding actions from several meetings. A separate note of these was circulated before the meeting of 2 December and a further note will be circulated ahead of the next meeting.

The key outstanding action points are to:

- Invite the Cabinet Secretary for Transport to attend a future CPG meeting to comment on the research commissioned by Guide Dogs, “Inclusive Design”;
- Follow up on the correspondence on the cancellation of the See Hear strategy;
- Invite the Electoral Management Board for Scotland to update the CPG on preparations for the 2026 Scottish Parliament election.

### **Agenda item 7 - Date of next meeting**

Wednesday 11 March, 13.00-14.30, via Teams and in Committee Room 3, Scottish Parliament.

NB – the Scottish Parliament dissolves for the 2026 Scottish Parliament Election on 26 March 2026.