

Approved Minutes of the Cross-Party Group on Visual Impairment

Tuesday 27 May 2025, 18.00-19.45, online and Committee Room 3, Scottish Parliament

Present – attending in person

MSPs

1. Stuart McMillan MSP

Invited guests

1. Jamie Hepburn MSP, Minister for Parliamentary Business
2. Chris Highcock, Secretary, Electoral Management Board (EMB)
3. Sarah Mackie, Head, Electoral Commission (Scotland)
4. Jim Savege, Chief Executive, Aberdeenshire Council and Chair of the EMB Sub-group on Accessibility

Observers

1. Deborah Cook, Scottish Government
2. Ellen Wright, Minister's Deputy Private Secretary

Non-MSP Group Members

1. Mark Ballard, Sight Scotland and Sight Scotland Veterans
2. Catriona Burness, RNIB Scotland
3. Gillian Hallard, RNIB Scotland
4. Matthew Leitch, Office of Stuart McMillan MSP
5. Professor John Ravenscroft, University of Edinburgh
6. Brenda Rennie, Association of British Dispensing Opticians
7. Alan Stewart
8. Joanna Zawadzka, Sight Scotland and Sight Scotland Veterans

Present – attending online

MSPs - attending online

1. Jeremy Balfour MSP
2. Neil Bibby MSP

Invited guests – attending online

1. Roz McCall MSP
2. Amy White, The ALLIANCE - Scottish Sensory Hub

Observers – attending online

1. Ellie May Garnish
2. Tom Skelton, RNIB
3. Liz Ure, Scottish Government

Non-MSP Group Members – attending online

1. Deirdre Aitken, Highland Blindcraft Sensory Services
2. Claire Black, NHS Education for Scotland
3. Steve Brown, Roche
4. Scott Cassidy, Blind Veterans UK
5. Graham Findlay, Thomas Pocklington Trust
6. Niall Foley, Guide Dogs Scotland
7. Raquel Garrido-Soriano, Visionary
8. Pauline Gibson, Hearing and Sight Care
9. Kirstie Henderson, RNIB Scotland
10. Thelma Ingram
11. Carla Marchbank, North East Sensory Services
12. Maureen MacMillan, Highland Blindcraft Sensory Services
13. Rod Murchison
14. Joanne O'Hanlon, Optometry Scotland
15. Sally Paterson, Vision Support Service, Aberdeen City Council
16. Mary Rasmussen
17. Ken Reid
18. Terry Robinson
19. Lewis Shaw, The ALLIANCE - Scottish Sensory Hub
20. Craig Spalding, Sight Scotland and Sight Scotland Veterans
21. Danny Sweeney
22. Ciria Tooth
23. Hannah Tweed, The ALLIANCE - Scottish Sensory Hub

24. Colette Walker

Apologies

1. James Adams, RNIB Scotland
2. Miles Briggs MSP
3. Eileen Clarkson, RNIB Scotland
4. Claire Forde, RNIB Scotland Advisory Group
5. Sheila Hands, NHS Tayside
6. Colin Hilditch, Sight Scotland and Scottish Braille Press
7. Margaret Jackson, RNIB Scotland
8. Joan Kerr
9. Iona McLean, Macular Society
10. Dan Meikle, RNIB Scotland
11. Michael Moore, Guide Dogs Scotland
12. James Newman, Scottish Government
13. Hussein Patwa
14. Nicoletta Primo, Sight Scotland and Sight Scotland Veterans
15. Allan Russell, RNIB Connect Radio
16. Kirin Saeed
17. Colin Smyth MSP
18. Mhairi Thurston
19. Laura Walker, Visibility Scotland
20. Jacquie Winning, Forth Valley Sensory Centre

Purpose of the group

Cross-Party Group in the Scottish Parliament on Visual Impairment
#CPGVI

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

Stuart McMillan MSP welcomed everyone to the meeting and read out the GDPR statement. Individuals who do not wish to be named in the minutes should let Catriona Burness know as they will otherwise appear on public record.

Agenda item 2 - Approval of minutes of meeting of 4 March 2025

Mover: Graham Findlay, Thomas Pocklington Trust.

Seconder: Niall Foley, Guide Dogs.

Minutes approved.

Agenda item 3 - Matters arising and Action Points

A report on the action points was included with the minutes.

Letters have been sent to those mentioned in the action points of the previous meeting and the CPGVI is awaiting replies.

The Office of Scottish Charity Regulator (OSCR) have sent updates on charity law in Scotland which will be circulated to CPGVI members.

Agenda item 4 – Making voting accessible

Jamie Hepburn MSP, Minister for Parliamentary Business

Making voting accessible

The Minister introduced the session on making voting accessible and thanked the CPG for inviting him to speak. He said that it was important that people were able to take part in voting and exercise their democratic right, with as few as barriers as possible. He referenced the 2024 RNIB Turned Out survey conducted after the 2024 UK General Election which found that only a quarter of blind and partially sighted respondents felt that the current system allows them to vote independently and in secret. He committed to doing something to address this for the next Scottish Parliament elections.

He mentioned the Programme for Government's commitment "to work with electoral administrators to deliver improvements in accessibility for those with sight loss voting in elections, in time for the 2026 Parliament elections". Several developments are taking place to ensure elections are accessible to people with sight loss for the next Scottish Parliament Elections in 2026. The Electoral Management Board for Scotland (EMB) accessibility sub-group has been working closely with Scottish Government and the Electoral Commission to improve accessibility for blind and partially sighted people.

A new tactile aid, a cardboard ballot paper overlay, has been developed to help people with sight loss vote independently. This was trialled and tested with assistance from the Forth Valley Sensory Centre and RNIB

Scotland, with positive feedback. A further trial of the overlay will take place on 19 June at two local government by-elections in Highland Council areas. He also confirmed that the overlay can be combined with an audio recording, via a telephone line, so voters can hear the names of candidates in the order they appear on the ballot paper. A telephone trial also took place at a Glasgow City Council by-election in March.

The EMB would reflect on these experiences ahead of the upcoming elections. The Minister confirmed that the overlay and audio support was only part of a package of support for voters and innovation would continue. This work was at the heart of the democratic system.

Stuart McMillan thanked the Minister and introduced Sarah Mackie of the Electoral Commission (Scotland).

Sarah Mackie, Head, Electoral Commission (Scotland)

Sarah Mackie outlined the Electoral Commission's work to improve accessibility, in preparation for the Scottish Parliament elections. Blind and partially sighted people often experience barriers when voting. Challenges include not receiving information in an accessible format, lack of support when voting and the practical method of marking an "X" on the ballot paper. She set out the legal framework for making reasonable adjustments in elections.

Under the Equality Act (2010), Returning Officers have a duty to make reasonable adjustments for disabled people and must take steps to anticipate and understand disabled voters so support can be provided.

The UK Elections Act (2022) now places a duty on Returning Officers to provide equipment to support disabled people equipment for voters to vote independently and in secret. Guidance was produced in 2023 on the types of assistance available. The Electoral Commission is now updating that guidance, across the UK, consulting with stakeholders. A formal 12-week consultation will open in August.

The Electoral Commission will also be conducting a series of awareness raising events and coming out to speak to blind and partially sighted people directly to ensure they know what to expect in terms of casting their vote.

The guidance will specify what Returning Officers must and could provide. Equipment included magnifiers, pencil grips, low level booths and information on polling cards. No equipment already provided would

be removed. The Electoral Commission will report on accessibility requirements following elections. They recommend that political parties prepare accessible manifestos. Polling station staff will also receive training, so they know how to use equipment to support voters on polling day.

Jim Savege Chief Executive, Aberdeenshire Council and Chair of the Electoral Management Board (EMB) sub-group on accessibility

Jim Savege spoke about the work of Electoral Management Board (EMB) sub-group on accessibility and preparations for the 2026 Scottish Parliament Elections. The sub-group has been set up to ensure that Returning Officers know how to maximise accessibility, in line with legislation and guidance. He thanked the engagement of local groups in by-elections.

He noted there was a need to consider arrangements for postal voting for blind and partially sighted voters. There were practical challenges for spoken ballot papers such as pronunciation of names (candidates could be asked to pronounce their own names for audio recordings) and further innovations such as use of QR codes. The sub-group was also carrying out work on a voter one-stop shop which would set out the accessibility measures available at polling places.

It is essential inclusive measures are in place from the start, and there is a good understanding of voters' needs within polling stations. He recognised the role polling staff play, including those who have knowledge and experience in helping to administer the election vote. Training would be carried out for new staff.

On voting aids, a Performance Framework for Returning Officers could ensure consistent and universal provision of support throughout Scotland. Guidance was prepared for the last Scottish Parliament elections and the EMB could also consider using their power of direction.

EMB Secretary, Chris Highcock, said the aim was to try and remove barriers to voting independently and in secret. Training of staff, and making sure voters were aware of what was available, would be key for the upcoming election.

Q and A

Stuart McMillan thanked the speakers. He said that manifestos should be accessible and noted that the CPGVI has written to all political parties about this at previous elections.

Question 1

Stuart McMillan asked about the timeline for the Electoral Commission consultation on guidance.

Question 2

Stuart McMillan also asked how blind and partially sighted voters would be made aware of the ballot paper overlay trial at the Highland Council byelections.

Sarah Mackie said formal consultation would begin in August for 12 weeks. The guidance would be published six months ahead of the election, in December 2025.

Jim Savege said that information would be provided to local advocacy groups about trials in Highland. They are keen to get feedback on the trials.

Chris Highcock said information would be available on the Highland Council website and phone numbers to hear spoken ballot papers for each ward would be available at polling stations and included on poll cards.

Question 3

Lewis Shaw asked about the availability of the ballot paper overlay to postal voters and whether the overlays could accommodate long regional list ballot papers.

The Minister said he had assurance that the overlay could accommodate different numbers of candidates for different elections.

Chris Highcock added that the tactile overlay can be produced easily in different lengths. He said that overlays would not be available for every postal voter, but these could be made available on request.

Question 4

Ken Reid said he had taken part in testing the new overlay. He found it a great improvement on the old tactile voting device. He hoped the overlay would be rolled out for 2026 and asked what training would be provided.

Jim Savege said that Returning Officers would provide comprehensive training to polling station staff to make sure staff were confident in using voting aids.

Chris Highcock noted that training must prepare staff so they can confidently support blind and partially sighted people. This doesn't need to be complicated but can be simple such as a few bullet points on how to support a person with sight loss to cast their vote. They are looking at developing training videos.

Question 5

Alan Stewart asked what would be done to improve postal voting for blind and partially sighted voters?

Sarah Mackie said there was a need to innovate here and recognised it was difficult to use the various envelopes and fill in the declaration.

Jim Savege said he was happy to look at this further with the sub-group.

Question 6

Mark Ballard asked when should Sight Scotland groups contact their local Returning Officers?

Sarah Mackie said there was an opportunity for Returning Officers to carry out local needs assessment and for sight loss councils to give information about how/when to engage.

Jim Savege said that it would be helpful for contact to be made now with Returning Officers.

Question 7

Graham Finlay remarked that the work carried out had been excellent, including making a phone number available.

Question 8

Deidre Aitken asked how people are being made aware of the trials in Highland Council? She offered to reinforce messages as her organisation operates in the local area.

Chris Highcock said he would link up Deidre with the Highland Council election team.

The Convener invited any remaining comments.

Terry Robinson commended the trial of the overlay and said we needed clarity on how postal voters can request overlays. He would also welcome trialling the overlay for postal voting.

Mary Rasmussen called for polling station staff to be trained in guiding and to not grab a blind or partially sighted person by the elbow. Jim Savege agreed that guiding techniques are important, and training must include this.

Lewis Shaw noted that two overlays would be required for the upcoming Scottish Parliament election, one for the constituency vote and one for the regional vote.

Graham Findlay requested that information from the trials be made available once the by-elections have taken place.

The Minister said he had found the discussion incredibly helpful and wants to continue dialogue on accessible voting. He will also take on board trials in relation to postal votes.

Stuart McMillan thanked all speakers for their contributions and noted the enthusiasm to make the situation better for people so they can vote independently and in secret.

Action points

Action 4.1

When published, the Electoral Commission consultation link will be forwarded to the CPGVI mailing list so individuals and organisations can respond.

Action 4.2

The EMB to provide the details of Returning Officers to Sight Scotland

Action 4.3

The EMB to link up Deirdre Aitken with Highland Council Returning Officer.

Action 4.4

The EMB to report back to the CPGVI on the results of byelection trials.

Agenda item 5 – Update on the work of the Cross-Party Group on Deafness Working Group on Sensory Care and Dementia

Roz McCall MSP, Working Group Convener, and Amy White, Senior Sensory Hub Officer (Deafness), Health and Social Care Alliance Scotland (the ALLIANCE).

Roz McCall MSP last spoke to the CPGVI in September 2024 to give a brief overview of their work. The working group of the Cross-party Group on Deafness aims to improve care pathways and support for people with dementia who also experience Deafness, Deafblindness or Visual Impairment, including BSL users. This working group, with support from two CPGVI members, is developing the first framework of sensory care standards for people affected by dementia in Scotland.

The working group wanted to know if or how sensory assessments feature as part of any dementia assessment pathway in Scotland, or during post-diagnostic support. Via a survey, they explored the practices of health and medical professionals who carry out memory/dementia assessments for people who are Deaf, Deafblind or who have a Visual Impairment, including BSL users, and the eye and hearing care specialists who assess sight and hearing.

Amy White reported that, in total, there were 317 survey responses from health and medical professionals in Scotland:

- 84 General Practitioners
- 108 health and medical professionals who perform memory/dementia assessments (but who are not GPs)
- 12 NHS Audiology services for adults
- 113 eye care specialists

A report has now been published. Some highlights from the findings include:

- Only six per cent of GPs specified that they would assess both sight and hearing as an integrated part of assessing memory/dementia.
- The survey asked if GPs were aware of any memory/dementia tools designed specifically for people with Deafness, Visual Impairment, or sign language users. Most respondents (93 per cent) were either not aware of any or did not have access to them. From the seven per cent who were aware of specific tools, only one respondent referenced a suitable assessment called the MoCA blind (a dementia assessment tool designed for people with Visual Impairments).
- Only 12 per cent of survey respondents indicated they would assess both hearing and sight as part of a memory/dementia assessment.
- The other responses reported not performing sensory assessments at all, or only doing so if Deafness, Deafblindness or Visual Impairment was suspected.

The report made 26 recommendations. The executive summary is available at: <https://www.alliance-scotland.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/ALLIANCE-report-for-CPG-on-Deafness-Executive-Summary-Dementia-Assessments-for-people-with-Deafness-Deafblindness-or-Visual-Impairment-April-2025.docx>

Work is now underway with Healthcare Improvement Scotland (HIS) to update clinical guidance for the assessment of dementia to include sensory loss. This includes SIGN national clinical guidelines for the assessment, diagnosis, care and support for people with dementia, so they can be updated with a list of suitable memory/dementia assessments for people with Deafness, Deafblindness or Visual Impairment.

The integration of sensory assessment services and dementia clinics is key to this happening. Amy White also mentioned an article published in Third Force News on the need for mandatory sensory assessments for people with dementia in Scotland. Link is available here: <https://tfn.scot/news/call-for-mandatory-sensory-tests-for-all-dementia-assessments>

Stuart McMillan thanked Roz McCall and Amy White for their presentations and offered support from the CPGVI on moving recommendations from the working group forward. He opened up to questions and comments.

Q and A

Question 1

Mark Ballard commended the work, noted Sight Scotland's role in this, and he hopes that findings will be disseminated widely. He also hopes that in a few years' time we will see a different figure to the one quoted in the report which shows only six per cent of GPs routinely identify whether dementia or sensory loss communication issues.

Roz McCall agreed with this.

Question 2

Graham Findlay highlighted that sight loss conditions such as Charles Bonnet Syndrome could be misdiagnosed as dementia leading to the wrong treatment being given.

Action point

Action 5.1

Link to the Alliance report to be sent to all members on the CPGVI mailing list: <https://www.alliance-scotland.org.uk/blog/news/dementia-assessments-for-people-with-deafness-deafblindness-or-visual-impairment-report-published/>

Agenda Item 6 - Any other competent business

Professor John Ravenscroft drew attention to the Scottish Government's consultation on proposed changes to appropriate qualifications for Qualified Teachers of Visual Impairment (QTVIs). The consultation closes on 4 July 2025.

Available at:

<https://consult.gov.scot/learning-directorate/qualifications-and-teacher-competencies/>

Mark Ballard noted that Sight Scotland is seeking views of children and young people who receive support via QTVIs and parents/carers to feed into this consultation. RNIB Scotland is also consulting its supporters, including its youth organisation, Haggeye.

Action 6.1

The consultation details will be recirculated to the CPGVI membership along with details of any related surveys and meetings notified to the Secretary.

Agenda item 7 - Date of next meeting

To be confirmed – September or October 2025.

Stuart McMillan thanked all in attendance and closed the meeting, wishing everyone a good summer.