

Cross-Party Group on Visual Impairment

Wednesday 20 November 2024, 13.00 – 14.15, online and Committee Room 1, Scottish Parliament

Present – attending in person

MSPs

1. Neil Bibby MSP
2. Stuart McMillan MSP
3. Colin Smyth MSP

Invited guests

1. Stephen Clegg, swimmer, and Paralympian gold medallist, Paris 2024
2. Kate Thomson-McDermott, Head of Carer Benefits and Case Transfer Policy, Social Security Directorate, Scottish Government

Observers

1. Claire Smith, Social Security Division, Scottish Government

Non-MSP Group Members

1. James Adams, RNIB Scotland
2. Neil Atkinson, RNIB Community Connection
3. Jordan Black, SAVIE
4. Catriona Burness, RNIB Scotland
5. Eileen Clarkson, RNIB Scotland
6. Jane Coates, RNIB Community Connection
7. Jane Donnelly, RNIB Connect Radio
8. Kirstie Henderson, RNIB Scotland
9. Matthew Leitch, Office of Stuart McMillan MSP
10. Maureen Macmillan, Sight Action
11. Jo MacQueen, RNIB Scotland
12. Dan Meikle, RNIB Scotland
13. Alan Stewart
14. Allan Russell, RNIB Connect Radio
15. Jacquie Winning, Forth Valley Sensory Centre

Present – attending online

MSPs - attending online

N/A

Invited guests – attending online

1. Mark Gaffney, Head of Policy, Scottish Disability Sport

Observers – attending online

1. Aqeel Ahmed, Children's Rights Unit, Scottish Government.
2. Claire Brown, Social Security Scotland
3. Colette Dunsmore, Scottish Government
4. Ellie May Garnish

Non-MSP Group Members – attending online

1. Paul Bartley, Optelec
2. Alan Bell, North East Sensory Services
3. Clare Bonetree, Family Fund
4. Steve Brown, Roche
5. Tanya Castell, RNIB Trustee
6. Raquel Garrido-Soriano, Visionary
7. Laura Gray, Macular Society
8. Gillian Hallard, RNIB Scotland
9. Sheila Hands, NHS Tayside
10. Colin Hilditch, Sight Scotland – Scottish Braille Press
11. Margaret Jackson, RNIB Scotland
12. Hazel McFarlane
13. Rod Murchison
14. Rory Paterson, RNIB Scotland
15. Nicoletta Primo, Sight Scotland and Sight Scotland Veterans
16. Professor John Ravenscroft, Scottish Sensory Centre,
University of Edinburgh
17. Jon Reid, The ALLIANCE - Scottish Sensory Hub
18. Terry Robinson
19. Lewis Shaw, The ALLIANCE - Scottish Sensory Hub
20. Davina Shiell, Sight Scotland and Sight Scotland Veterans
21. Danny Sweeney
22. Hannah Tweed, The ALLIANCE - Scottish Sensory Hub
23. David Weir

Apologies

1. Deirdre Aitken, Sight Action
2. Salena Begley, Family Fund
3. Miles Briggs MSP
4. Laura Jones, RNIB Scotland
5. Amanda Foster
6. David McKerral
7. Iona McLean, Macular Society
8. Carla Marchbank, North East Sensory Services
9. Joanne O'Hanlon, Optometry Scotland
10. Sally Paterson, Vision Support Service, Aberdeen City Council
11. Hussein Patwa
12. Mary Rasmussen
13. Fiona Sandford, Visionary
14. Angus Scott, NHS Forth Valley
15. Ciria Tooth
16. Colette Walker

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 welcomed everyone to the meeting and read out the GDPR statement. If anyone does not wish their name to appear on any publicly available CPG documents, please let the Secretary know.

Agenda item 2 - Approval of minutes of AGM and meeting of 4 September 2024

The minutes of the last meeting were confirmed as correct.

Proposed: Alan Stewart

Seconded: Terry Robinson

Agenda item 3 - Matters arising and Action Points

The Action Points were circulated on 1 October with the notice of this meeting. Key points noted were as follows:

- The Secretary circulated contacts and information links on the CPG on Deafness working group including email addresses for Hannah Tweed and Amy White.
- Contact details for Eilidh Thomson from Optometry Scotland were also distributed.
- Information was circulated about the Scottish Collaborative Optometry Ophthalmology Network e-research (SCONe) project.
- Following a discussion on definitions of levels of sight loss and hearing loss, Jonathan Reid mentioned a literature review and body of work on the Tactile Working Memory Scale (TWMS) by Jude Nichols, Annika Johannessen and Trees van Nunen, published by the Nordic Welfare Centre. The TWMS is used to assess cognition within a deafblind population, rather than dementia within sight loss. The link to this work which has been peer reviewed is available below:
<https://nordicwelfare.org/en/publikationer/tactile-working-memory-scale-a-professional-manual/>.
- After noting the passing of Sandra Wilson, former Chair and RNIB Scotland and longstanding CPG member, a note of condolence from the CPGVI was sent to her family.
- Formal invitations have been sent out for RNIB Scotland's Braille 200 reception in the Garden Lobby of the Scottish Parliament. This will be hosted by Stuart McMillan MSP, to mark the 200th anniversary of the invention of braille on Wednesday 29 January 2025. Attendance is offered on a first-come, first-served, basis.

Questions arising from action points

Feedback was requested on the UK General Election and Voter ID. It was noted that RNIB Scotland and the Forth Valley Sensory Centre are collaborating with Scottish Government officials to test the latest version of a card ballot paper overlay.

3.Further Action Points

Action 3.1: The Secretary will circulate the Electoral Commission Report and RNIB's Turned Out Report to the CPGVI membership.

Action 3.2: The CPGVI will be kept informed of developments in accessible voting and the Minister for Parliamentary Business will be invited to a future meeting.

Agenda item 4 – Social security in Scotland – transferring disability and carer benefits

Kate Thomson-McDermott, Head of Carer Benefits and Case Transfer Policy, Social Security Directorate, Scottish Government

Stuart McMillan MSP introduced Kate Thomson-McDermott, Head of Carer Benefits and Case Transfer Policy, Social Security Directorate, Scottish Government.

A paper, “Social security in Scotland – transferring disability and carer benefits”, was circulated in advance of the meeting, covering the following:

- Her role in the Case Transfer Policy Team within Social Security Scotland Directorate.
- Overview of social security in Scotland.
- The case transfer process.
- Case transfer principles.
- Progress of case transfer.
- Future transfers.

Key points from her presentation to the CPGVI are summarised below:

- A successful roundtable discussion was held in October with Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice, Shirley Ann Somerville, MSP and RNIB Scotland supporters to discuss experiences of transferring from Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) benefits to Adult Disability Payment (ADP).
- Over 720,000 Scottish residents have now had their benefit awards transferred from the DWP to Social Security Scotland, across five different benefits.
- The case transfer process for various benefits has happened in stages following the enactment of the Social Security (Scotland) Act 2016 by the Scottish Parliament.
- A series of key principles are in place to ensure a safe and secure transition for those transferring onto Social Security Scotland benefits.
- At present it takes around 13-17 weeks for those claiming DWP benefit such as Personal Independence Payment (PIP) to be transferred onto Adult Disability Payment (ADP). However, processing times vary depending on each benefit and claimant circumstances.
- For those who have no change in condition, who were already claiming a DWP equivalent benefit, attempts are made to ensure this is as smooth as possible, with no new application required.

- Those who have experienced a change in condition or whose PIP award was due for renewal may need to be reassessed under ADP.
- Social Security Scotland has safeguarding measures in place to ensure Appointees nominated for benefit claimants are appropriate to act on the behalf.
- If there is a change in award as part of the case transfer process different methods apply for backdating payments, depending on whether the award is higher or lower than previously.
- Around two-thirds of PIP cases in Scotland have been transferred onto ADP – which equates to around 200,000 people in Scotland.
- Forty-seven thousand children and young people have also been transferred from Child DLA onto Child Disability Payment (CDP).
- It is hoped the transfer process for remaining benefits will continue into 2025 and beyond for existing DWP claimants living in Scotland. This includes Carers Support Payment, which is replacing Carers Allowance; Pension Age Disability Payment which is replacing Attendance Allowance, and Scottish Disability Living Allowance (DLA) which will replace DLA.

Questions/comments

The Convener thanked Kate Thomson-McDermott for speaking and asked why there are differences in case processing times for different benefits.

Kate Thomson-McDermott noted there are different transfer windows depending on situations. For example, the aim is for those who meet terminal illness entitlement conditions to be transferred as quickly as possible.

Question: whether those who received an ADP decision, which was a like-for-like decision based on their PIP award, had taken up their right to request a redetermination or appeal?

Kate Thomson-McDermott stated whilst many PIP case transfers will result in the same rate and entitlement of benefit under ADP, it is subject to a separate legal process. This means once a person has been transferred onto ADP, they maintain their right to request a redetermination and subsequently appeal their ADP award if they wish.

Question: why does Scottish DLA exist given ADP is the replacement disability benefit for most adults in Scotland?

Kate Thomson-McDermott explained that Scottish Ministers said they would honour the decision taken by the UK Government in 2013, to ensure that existing DLA claimants who had reached their 65th birthday by 8 April 2013 did not transfer onto PIP. This means around 38,000-40,000 individuals in Scotland who fall into this category will transfer onto Scottish DLA. Those who do not fall into this category are likely to be reassessed under ADP criteria.

Question: DLA awards could be awarded indefinitely but is ten years now the maximum length of award under ADP? Reviews of benefits can be a source of anxiety, particularly for people who have conditions which will not improve/get better.

Kate Thomson-McDermott stated that benefit awards are in place and reviews will be as light touch as possible for those whose condition is unlikely to change.

Comment: noted concerns around waiting times for new applications.

Kate Thomson-McDermott said the Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice is prioritising this as an ongoing issue and updates on average processing times will be available soon.

The Convener thanked Kate Thomson-McDermott for speaking.

4.Action point

4.1. Kate Thomson-McDermott will provide more information on the case review process to the CPGVI.

Agenda item 5 – Scottish disability sports

Mark Gaffney, Head of Policy, Scottish Disability Sport

Mark Gaffney gave an overview of the work of Scottish Disability Sport. Key highlights from Mark's presentation include:

- Scottish Disability Sport (SDS) was established 60 years ago and is the national governing body for disability in sport in Scotland. They work with around 40 sporting bodies, including Sport Scotland, local authorities, government and the third sector.
- Partnerships with education and health colleagues help deliver local developments to support more disabled people to become active.

- While sport isn't for everyone, the overall aim of Scottish Disability Sport is to enable people to become more active and get involved in sport if they want to.
- Scottish Disability Sport host several national championships across seven different sports. Each region has its own SDS regional manager who reaches into communities to ensure disabled people can be supported into activities of their chosen sport. This includes working with school age participants and younger people with visual impairments.
- Recently they have acquired funding to help deliver courses for trainee teachers within college and university settings on models of inclusive education. However, he recognised that education and training can only go so far and changing behaviour and perceptions is vital.
- They recently held a British Blind Sport engagement day attended by forty-five people.
- They are arranging more events and are looking to build more networks using a pan-disability approach. For example, on Saturday 14 June 2025, they are hosting a Scotland Disability Sport Exhibition Event at Stirling University. They are asking partners to come and exhibit work. This will be key to building more relations with colleagues in training and education.
- A Scottish Disability Sport National Survey is being conducted (will share with CPGVI membership). Initial results show around 75 per cent of disabled people want to be more active and 82 per cent of people notice a benefit when they become more active.
- Mark also noted that 49 per cent of those involved in sporting activities rely on benefits to enable their participation, yet there is still a fear that benefits will be stopped if a person is seen as active and independent. Scottish Disability Sport and Social Security Scotland have been working together on this issue.
- Scottish Disability Sport (SDS) Week starts on Monday and will use social media to promote activities which take place across Scotland. Samatha Gough (who is a 20-year-old blind athlete from Edinburgh, and captain of England's first ever blind women's football squad), is the Ambassador for this. Over the course of this week there will be initiatives to help promote awareness of disabled people in sport, and it's hoped more will help promote this.

The Convener thanked Mark Gaffney for his presentation and introduced Stephen Clegg.

Stephen Clegg, swimmer, and Paralympian gold medallist, Paris 2024 – “Eyes Wide Open”

Stephen talked about his personal experience of acquiring a visual impairment as a child and challenges he faced through his experiences, including expectations of what others thought he'd be able to do.

He mentioned that the incidence of poor mental health amongst young people with visual impairments is much higher, almost double, when comparing rates amongst sighted peers.

He spoke about resources and the role parents and educators play in enabling young people to overcome barriers to participate in sport. For example, the support he received from Jane Coates at RNIB Scotland, and his swimming coaches, enabled him to realise his own potential and support him towards his achievements.

Questions/comments

Stuart McMillan thanked Stephen Clegg for his presentation recognising his achievements in overcoming adversity and strength in advocating for young people with visual impairments. He also noted how fortunate the CPGVI was to hear from him and thanked him for sharing his story.

At this point Stuart had to leave the meeting and handed the chair over to Neil Bibby, MSP.

Comment: recognises the challenges people face in accessing facilities, particularly in local levels.

Stephen Clegg said he was fortunate in being able to access Edinburgh swimming pools to pursue his training when he was around aged 17 but said not every young person has access to these facilities.

He also highlighted Scottish Swimming's "Save Our Pool Campaign" to stop the closure of swimming pools and leisure facilities in local areas. They play a vital role in enabling people to remain active – which has positive impacts on mental health too.

Question: what is next for Stephen Clegg in terms of his ambitions?

Stephen is now focussing on participation in Los Angeles Paralympic Games in 2028. His target was to win gold at the Paris Paralympic games this year. He hopes more people with visual impairments will

participate in swimming in the British programme and wants to support the participation of people with visual impairment in swimming generally.

Neil Bibby MSP asked Stephen what MSPs can do to help address barriers for disabled children and young people when it comes to accessing facilities and sport. He highlighted that around 40 per cent of school pupils leave school without the ability to swim.

Stephen Clegg highlighted the need for disabled people to gain a level of access to sporting activities – this requires more funding and awareness amongst coaches. Primary school teachers also require awareness and understanding when it comes to teaching disabled children and young people about getting active – it doesn't necessarily involve specialist input to enable them to achieve their goals. There are other ways to maximise learning which don't require visual teaching to become a professional athlete.

Comment: also highlighted consequences of barriers which disabled children and young people face in comparison to their peers, including poor mental health. He noted participation in sport isn't just about competing - anyone can get active. There must be integration of blind and partially sighted people so that they can get active in their own communities. He also highlighted RNIB's See Sport Differently campaign.

Comment: highlighted the need for local facilities to understand their duties when it comes to making adaptations for disabled people, noting her own experiences and barriers she came up against when requesting a lane in her swimming pool.

Mark Gaffney highlighted work to overcome attitudinal and physical barriers in training facilities. He also mentioned work with Euan's Guide and encouraged people to post user reviews of sporting facilities they have used to encourage inclusion and access ratings.

Question: Visual Impairment Network for Children & Young People (VINCYP) findings show 60 per cent of children and young people with visual impairment are affected by cerebral visual impairment. Is this covered when considering adaptations, as they may be different from those who have an ocular visual impairment?

Mark Gaffney said he could work with Professor Ravenscroft to look at how the curriculum could be used to highlight differences and work around this.

Comment: the use of volunteers could encourage the involvement of young people with visual impairments in inclusive sport as well as parental involvement. Location of swimming pools can also be a huge barrier.

Mark Gaffney noted volunteer rates have reduced since the pandemic, but Volunteer Scotland have a campaign to encourage more young people to volunteer. He also highlighted the Skills Development Scotland Modern Apprenticeship scheme to recruit disabled young people who can encourage facilities to make reasonable adjustments and promote sport amongst disabled people. The Commonwealth Games are due to take place in Glasgow in 2026 and this could be used as an opportunity to encourage more people to volunteer in sport, as well as to show why sport is for everyone and benefits physical and mental health.

Stephen Clegg noted the vital role volunteers play across all sports, including in raising awareness that physical and mental health go hand in hand.

5.Action Point

Action 5.1: to share link to RNIB See Sport Differently resources - <https://seesportdifferently.org.uk/>

Agenda Item 6 - Any other competent business

None.

Agenda item 7 - Date of next meeting

The next CPGVI will take place in February 2025.

The Secretariat is liaising with the Minister's Office on a possible presentation on accessible voting.

Neil Bibby MSP thanked everyone for their contributions and closed the meeting, wishing all the best for upcoming Christmas and New Year season.