

Cross-Party Group on Visual Impairment

Wednesday 21 February 2024, 13.00 - 14.15

Committee Room 3, Scottish Parliament, and online via Teams

Present – attending in person

MSPs

1. Stuart McMillan MSP
2. Colin Smyth MSP

Invited guests

1. George Adam MSP, Minister for Parliamentary Business
2. Catherine Heggie, Electoral Commission
3. Chris Highcock, Secretary to the Electoral Management Board for Scotland

Observers

1. Alison Davidson, Electoral Commission
2. Ross Gilligan, SightSavers
3. Hannah McNicol, Office of Jeremy Balfour MSP
4. Sarah Mackie, Electoral Commission
5. James Newman, Scottish Government
6. Liz Ure, Scottish Government

Non-MSP Group Members

1. James Adams, RNIB Scotland
2. Salena Begley, Family Fund
3. Catriona Burness, RNIB Scotland
4. Raquel Garrido-Soriano, Visionary UK
5. Mairi Graham
6. Gillian Hallard, RNIB Scotland
7. Jo MacQueen, RNIB Scotland
8. Dan Meikle, RNIB Scotland
9. Alan Stewart
10. Jacquie Winning, Forth Valley Sensory Centre

Present – attending online

MSPs - attending online - none

Invited guests – attending online

1. Tim Robinson, Glaukos

Observers – attending online

1. Alexander Evison
2. Martin Ingram, Aberdeenshire Council
3. Lindsey Robinson, Moray Council
4. Niven Smith, Glaukos

Non-MSP Group Members – attending online

1. Lisa Archibald
2. Paul Bartley, Optelec
3. Claire Black
4. Claire Forde, RNIB Scotland Advisory Group – check not Claire Black
5. Laura Gray, Macular Society
6. Kirstie Henderson, RNIB Scotland
7. Thelma Ingram
8. Margaret Jackson, RNIB Scotland
9. Linda Johnston
10. Matthew Leitch, Office of Stuart McMillan MSP
11. Adam Lodge
12. Joan Kerr
13. Maureen MacMillan, Sight Action
14. Alison Morris, Vision Support, Uddingston Grammar
15. Alison Rae, Dundee Blind & Partially Sighted Society
16. Mary Rasmussen
17. Ken Reid
18. Terry Robinson
19. Allan Russell, Connect Radio
20. Lewis Shaw, The ALLIANCE - Scottish Sensory Hub
21. Davina Shiell, Sight Scotland and Sight Scotland Veterans
22. Danny Sweeney, North Ayrshire Council
23. Cirta Tooth
24. Hannah Tweed, The ALLIANCE - Scottish Sensory Hub

Apologies

1. Deirdre Aitken, Sight Action
2. Neil Bibby MSP
3. Miles Briggs MSP
4. Steve Brown, Roche
5. Bruce Christie, RNIB Scotland Advisory Group
6. Eileen Clarkson, RNIB Scotland
7. Elizabeth Docherty, Optometry Scotland
8. John Donaldson, Scottish Braille Press
9. Amanda Foster
10. Niall Foley, Guide Dogs Scotland
11. Sheila Hands, NHS Tayside
12. Gillian Heavie, Scottish Government
13. Laura Jones, RNIB Scotland
14. Maureen McAllister
15. Elizabeth McCann, Scottish Sensory Centre, University of Edinburgh
16. Michael Moore, Guide Dogs Scotland
17. Eilidh Morrison, Scottish Youth Parliament
18. Heather Palmer, Scottish Government
19. Rory Paterson, RNIB Scotland
20. Sally Paterson, Vision Support Service, Aberdeen City Council
21. Hussein Patwa
22. Lee Shennan, Scottish Government
23. Susan Shippey, Scottish Government

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

Stuart McMillan welcomed everyone to the meeting online and in person at the Scottish Parliament. He then read out the GDPR statement and

asked anyone who does not wish to be named in the publicly available minutes to inform the CPGVI Secretary, Catriona Burness.

Agenda item 2 - Approval of minutes of meeting of 5 December 2023

Mover: Jacquie Winning, Forth Valley Sensory Centre
Seconder: Terry Robinson

Agenda item 3 - Matters arising and Action Points

The Convener read out Action Points from previous meetings of the CPGVI including:

3.1. The proposed National Care Service for Scotland was the main topic at the CPGVI meeting on 16 May 2023. It was agreed to discuss this again when legislation was further advanced. An invitation has been extended to the responsible minister, Maree Todd, Minister for Social Care, Mental Wellbeing and Sport. A date has not yet been agreed.

3.2. Eye care for pupils within specialist school settings in Scotland was the discussion topic at the CPGVI on 20 September 2023. An update will be made at a future meeting.

3.3. Collaboration request from Colin Beattie MSP – Chair of the CPG on Deafness - this will be discussed further under AOCB today.

3.4. Transport Scotland and COSLA will be invited to a future CPGVI meeting once more information is available on how local authorities are enforcing the pavement parking ban.

3.5. The CPGVI office-bearers discussed action on time off work for vision rehabilitation and is hoped there will be time to discuss this at a future CPGVI meeting. The CPGVI previously discussed employment and heard from visually impaired people who had used Access to Work in Scotland on 5 October 2022.

3.6. Convener Stuart McMillan MSP reported on his meeting with representatives from Glaukos and RLT UK (Red Light Therapy). Glaukos is making a presentation today.

Agenda item 4 – Scotland - Electoral Reform

The Convener welcomed speakers on Electoral Reform in Scotland:

- George Adam MSP, Minister for Parliamentary Business

- Chris Highcock, Secretary to the Electoral Management Board for Scotland

George Adam MSP, Minister for Parliamentary Business

The Minister said that the Scottish Elections (Representation and Reform) Bill is part of a wider process to modernise and make elections more accessible. Most of the detail will be laid out in secondary legislation, rather than in primary legislation. He said this would allow for more flexibility and pilots of solutions to enable people with visual impairments to cast their vote during elections independently and in secret.

A substantial amount of work has already taken place and the team overseeing this work are keen to continue dialogue with the sight loss sector in Scotland. Examples of this work are:

- Tactile ballot paper tests with blind and partially sighted people across Scotland.
- Training election officials on tactile voting devices (TVDs), ballot papers and making sure they know how best to accommodate people with visual impairments at polling stations.
- Looking at how postal voting can be made as accessible as possible for blind and partially sighted people.

Chris Highcock, Secretary to the Electoral Management Board for Scotland

Chris Highcock highlighted the work of the Board. The EMB has a responsibility to coordinate the activities of Returning Officers across Scotland. This includes promoting best practice and working towards achieving consistency across Scotland when it comes to the delivery of elections.

A fundamental principle of casting a vote in elections is being able to do this in secret. Existing practices have often failed to enable blind and partially sighted people to do this independently. Election professionals have been aware of challenges delivering accessible elections for some time. Now there is an opportunity to change and improve on practices. The EMB is working on this in several ways:

- Making changes using existing rules and looking at how elections are delivered across Scotland. This includes hearing directly from people with sight loss about challenges they have faced and what can be done to improve their experience.

- The UK Elections Act states that Returning Officers must take all reasonable steps at polling stations to ensure elections are accessible.
- The EMB is working with the Scottish Government to improve the situation in Scotland. This includes examining the voter journey from registration, through to casting a vote in elections, whether this is done in person at a polling station, by post or by proxy. The aim is to highlight challenges encountered at each stage and find solutions to overcome these.

In the short-term, changes will be made ahead of the upcoming UK General Election. Recommendations for Returning Officers and Election Registration Officers include better signage at polling stations, training of staff, and having accessible information online. Some local authorities in England have already introduced new measures such as audio files and online solutions such as audio described ballot papers.

In the medium term, it is hoped more accessible measures will be in place for the Scottish Parliamentary Elections in 2026. Work is underway to develop a website to ensure all information concerning accessibility during elections is available in one place.

Tactile aids and audible ballot papers to enable people with sight loss to cast their vote independently are under development and test results to date have proved successful. One example of a potential new voting aid that is about to be tested is a disposable tactile overlay which fits exactly over a ballot paper so people with visual impairments can identify separate candidates and make their selections. Other options which are being considered include telephone helplines and webpages on local authority websites where people can get accessible information on local candidates.

By 2027, when Scottish local council elections are due, it is hoped there will be a range of solutions in place to enable people with visual impairments to cast their vote independently and in secret. This could include audible ballot papers, apps which people could use to hear their polling card information, as well as possibility of using email and other online solutions.

The EMB is keen to hear from people about their experiences of polling places and what could be done to make it easier to vote. A clear message from the EMB is that elections must deliver in the interests of the voter (as opposed to Returning Officers and the government).

The Convener thanked the speakers and opened the meeting up for questions:

Q and A

Question 1: Cirta Tooth asked if examples from other countries have been examined to help inform this work. She mentioned developments introduced for people with visual impairments in the Netherlands.

Chris Highcock cited useful learning from Estonia on the digital delivery of public services. The EMB would like to hear about international examples which may be useful.

Question 2: Lewis Shaw liked the idea of disposable tactile overlays which can be used on ballot papers. As the numbers of candidates standing in each area can vary dramatically, it would be helpful if tactile overlays could reflect this.

Chris Highcock said that disposable tactile voting cards can be adapted to reflect the number of candidates printed on each ballot paper.

Question 3: Terry Robinson said that notches could be used to ensure the ballot paper and tactile voting overlay are correctly aligned and that these solutions should also be available for postal voting.

Chris Highcock agreed this is important and said that the ballot paper overlay has a cut-out circle in the upper right-hand corner.

The Minister said he is happy to engage and listen to ideas for solutions. Terry Robinson is keen to be involved in future tests and trials of voting aids.

Question 4: Jacquie Winning asked if the training of polling station staff factored in the involvement of people with lived experience, either in the delivery or development of training materials.

Chris Highcock said that there is a recognition that Returning Officers must involve people with lived experience in the development and training of all those involved in delivering elections and that visually impaired speakers including Ken Reid had spoken at training sessions.

James Adams offered to help match up Local Electoral Officers and Returning Officers with organisations who support people with sight loss in their area to facilitate their involvement.

Chris Highcock supported this idea.

The Convener thanked all speakers.

ACTIONS

4.1. Contact details for Chris Highcock of the EMB to be shared with the CPG members.

4.2. James Adams will consult with the EMB to ensure links are made between local authority election offices and local sight loss organisations if required.

4.3. The Convener asked group members to either send in questions, comments, or information to be passed on to the Scottish Government Elections Team and the EMB via the CPG Secretary.

Agenda item 5 - UK General Election 2024/2025 and Voter ID

Catherine Heggie of the Electoral Commission spoke on preparations for the next UK general election. Although a date for the Election has not been announced, it must take place by the end of January 2025.

Voter ID will be required for voting at polling stations at the UK General Election in Scotland; however, Voter ID is not required for voting at Scottish Parliament or Scottish local government elections.

Work is underway to make individuals aware of this change, including circulating information on how to obtain voter ID if a person doesn't already own a form of accepted photo ID. For example, driving licence photocard, passport, National Entitlement Card (NEC), blue badge card may be accepted as Voter ID. A full list is available on this website: <https://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/voting-and-elections/voter-id/accepted-forms-photo-id>

It is recognised some forms of ID may have expired; however, the ID can only be used if the photograph printed on this still resembles the person when they go to vote.

The requirement to show photographic ID will not apply to those who choose to vote via proxy or postal vote.

Anyone who doesn't have accepted ID can apply for free voter ID, known as a Voter Authority Certificate. The deadline to apply for a Voter Authority Certificate is six days in advance of when the General Election will be held, but anyone without ID should apply as soon as possible. For

those living in Scotland there is more information available online at: <https://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/voting-and-elections/voter-id/applying-a-voter-authority-certificate>

If people require assistance with making an application, or registering to vote they can contact their local Electoral Registration Office – a postcode search facility is available on this website: <https://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/i-am-a/voter/your-election-information>

For those who do not have access to the internet their local Electoral Registration Office can provide application forms, help with filling out forms, and take the voter's photograph for them.

There is clear guidance for Returning Officers who must take all reasonable steps to proactively engage with local communities on the new requirement for voter ID. Staff are also available within polling stations to assist voters with this during polling days.

A wide range of information on obtaining/applying for voter ID is available on the Electoral Commission website. This also includes information available in alternative formats, such as braille, audio, large print, and British Sign Language.

A series of events (online and in person) will take place during the run up to the UK General Election to encourage diverse groups to understand the requirement for Voter ID and help obtain it. This includes working with the sight loss sector to ensure blind and partially sighted people know how and where to get assistance should they require this.

The Convener thanked the speaker and opened for questions.

Q and A

Question 1: The Convener asked what feedback, positive and negative, there has been so far from elections where Voter ID was required, particularly amongst minority groups, for example, disabled people or people from Black and ethnic minority communities.

Answer: Elections in May 2024 in England will provide up to date feedback on how it is working.

Targeted information is available for groups, for example, amongst people with learning disabilities and for those where English is not their first language. There will also be a mass advertising campaign at some

point in 2024 to ensure the public get information on time about Voter ID.

James Newman of the Scottish Government mentioned a small grants scheme available for those who work with harder to reach groups on democratic engagement. This draws on experience from the Welsh Government which awarded grants to target information amongst groups who may require support to engage with democratic processes.

James Adams said that blind and partially sighted people may be less likely to have existing forms of photographic ID mentioned such as photocard driving licences. RNIB Scotland can help disseminate information to groups of people with visual impairments across Scotland and can help connect with local organisations where support may be required.

Question 2: Salena Begley cited cost being a barrier to obtaining photographic ID such as passports. She also highlighted digital barriers for those who can't access information online, and the need for help for those in rural/remote locations, where services may not be widely available to get help with voter ID.

Lessons have been learned from the roll out of the NEC card for under 22-year-olds in Scotland. These also highlighted challenges in relation to getting information out to those who are digitally excluded or affected by poverty.

The Convener mentioned work done by Inverclyde Council to ensure mass take up of the NEC card such as making sure application forms were widely available in schools. In promoting uptake of Voter ID, it may be useful to contact NEC headquarters in Dundee about work undertaken with Young Scot to promote the under-22 NEC card.

The Convener said that his constituents can attend his local constituency office if they require support with Voter ID such as printing out application forms.

Question 3: Colin Smyth MSP also offered support from his constituency office with Voter ID forms. He asked if evidence exists on the number committing voter fraud in Scotland, that is, people impersonating others at polling stations. He also raised a general point about increasing voter turnout and encouraging people to vote since election turnout numbers have been decreasing.

There have been reports of small numbers of people committing voter fraud in Scotland. There is also recognition that encouraging people to vote in the first place is a priority. People can access Local Electoral Offices to get help with applications for voter ID, including help with printing off and completing forms and taking photographs.

Adam Lodge said that Visibility Scotland offer sighted guide training and visual impairment awareness training which could be provided to Local Election Officers and Returning Officers if there is interest. Contact details were provided: adam.lodge@visibilityscotland.org.uk

ACTION

5.1. The Electoral Commission will send contact details and information on Voter ID requirements for circulation to CPGVI members. Organisations present are also welcome to get in touch to discuss hosting an event to raise awareness.

Agenda item 6 - Access to glaucoma medical technologies in Scotland

Tim Robinson, Market Development Manager with Glaukos, gave information about a medical aid which can help to prevent deterioration in sight amongst patients with early-stage glaucoma.

It is a small titanium stent which can help to drain excess fluid which often builds up in the eye and can raise pressure and cause problems in people with glaucoma.

He gave an overview of some challenges within the NHS including managing patients with glaucoma, who can be at substantial risk of losing their sight if existing treatment regimens are not followed. Eye drops are the main treatment for glaucoma; however, these can be difficult to administer, and adherence can be low with around one in three patients complying with treatment.

Scotland has a growing number of people diagnosed with glaucoma, with estimates suggesting around 78,000 people now live with the condition. However, it has been suggested up to 50 per cent of glaucoma cases go undetected so the figure could be far higher.

There are also workforce and capacity issues, which means patients are not always offered appointments in a timely manner, particularly those who are waiting for follow up.

Whilst mild cases of glaucoma can be managed in the community, for patients who have advanced glaucoma, interventions can become more invasive and resource intensive. For instance, regular post-surgery follow up visits are required following surgery.

There are other costs to consider. People affected by glaucoma may be prone to trips and falls which require treatment and care. Other social care services may need to step in to support a person at home.

There is the potential for patients undergoing cataract surgery to have the stent inserted should glaucoma also be present; however, this must be discussed on a case-by-case basis.

To date an estimated 50,000 people across the UK have now had surgery to insert the stent. However, only five hundred people in Scotland have had the treatment. Parts of the country such as Glasgow and Dundee are offering the treatment more than other areas.

A Parliamentary Roundtable is taking place on 21st March 2024 for those interested in learning more about this treatment.

The Convener thanked Tim and asked if anyone had any questions:

Q and A

Question 1: Alan Stewart asked whether the stent can be used in advanced stages of glaucoma.

Tim Robinson said it is best if individuals speak to their consultant about whether this would be a useful procedure for them.

Agenda Item 7 - Any other competent business

7.1 CPG on Deafness Sensory Care and Dementia Working Group.

Hannah Tweed gave an update on the Cross-Party Group (CPG) on Deafness Working Group on Sensory Care and Dementia. It may be of interest to some CPGVI members. The first working group meeting is taking place on Wednesday 13 March 4.00-5.00pm.

ACTION

7.1. The CPGVI Secretariat will circulate the working group terms of reference and inform the CGP on Deafness of any expressions of interest from CPGVI members.

7.2. The working group chair Roz McCall MSP will be invited to give a brief update at the CPGVI meeting on 5 June.

Agenda item 8 - Date of next meeting

The next meeting is confirmed for Wednesday 5 June from 18.00, Committee Room 3, Scottish Parliament, and online.

The Convener thanked everyone for contributions and closed the meeting.