

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

Tuesday 22 February, 18:00-19:00 by Teams

Minute

Present

MSPs

1. Stuart McMillan MSP
2. Colin Smyth MSP

Invited guests

0. George Adam MSP, Minister for Parliamentary Business [speaker]
1. Sarah Mackie, Electoral Commission in Scotland [speaker]
2. Ken Reid, RNIB Scotland [speaker; and CPGVI group member]
3. Amy Craddock, RNIB
4. Lauchlan Hall, Scottish Government
5. Catherine Heggie, Electoral Commission in Scotland
6. Matthew Linden, Scottish Government
7. James Newman, Scottish Government
8. Mike Stewart, Scottish Government
9. Liz Ure, Scottish Government

Non-MSP Group Members

1. James Adams, RNIB Scotland
2. Paul Bartley, Optelec Ltd
3. Selena Begley, Family Fund
4. Claire Black, NHS Education for Scotland
5. Ian Brown, RNIB Scotland
6. Steve Brown
7. Catriona Burness, RNIB Scotland
8. Pamela Chater, Versus Arthritis
9. Lucy Chetty, The Royal Blind School/Sight Scotland
10. Bruce Christie, RNIB Scotland Advisory Group
11. Claire Forde, RNIB Scotland Advisory Group

- 12.Laura Gray, Macular Society
- 13.Cllr Sheila Hands
- 14.Colin Hilditch, Sight Scotland and Sight Scotland Veterans
- 15.Thelma Ingram
- 16.Margaret Jackson, RNIB Scotland
- 17.Laura Jones, RNIB Scotland
- 18.Joan Kerr
- 19.Maureen Macmillan, Sight Action
- 20.Elizabeth McCann, Moray House School of Education and Sport,  
University of Edinburgh
- 21.Gwenn McCreath, Vision PK
- 22.Hazel McFarlane, Scottish Sensory Hub
- 23.Rachael McMurchy, RNIB Scotland
- 24.Jo MacQueen, RNIB Scotland
- 25.Philippa Mason, Glaucoma UK
- 26.Gillian Mitchell, Sight Action
- 27.Mike Moore, Guide Dogs Scotland
- 28.Eilidh Morrison, Haggeye
- 29.Terry Moody
- 30.Sally Paterson, Vision Support Service, Aberdeen City Council
- 31.Mary Rasmussen
- 32.Professor John Ravenscroft, Scottish Sensory Centre, University  
of Edinburgh
- 33.Ann Robertson, NESS (North East Sensory Services)
- 34.Terry Robinson
- 35.Graeme Rose, Novartis
- 36.Kirin Saeed
- 37.Angus Scott, NHS Forth Valley
- 38.Craig Spalding, Sight Scotland and Sight Scotland Veterans
- 39.Alan Stewart
- 40.Gil Syme, Optometry Scotland
- 41.Mairi Thurston, VI Charity Sector Partnership Mental Health  
Committee
- 42.Colette Walker
- 43.Laura Walker, Visibility
- 44.Sandra Wilson
- 45.Jacquie Winning, Forth Valley Sensory Centre

## Apologies

0. Richard Baker, Sight Scotland and Sight Scotland Veterans
1. Jeremy Balfour MSP
2. Neil Bibby MSP
3. Sally Cameron, seescape
4. Scott Cassidy Blind Veterans UK
5. Rosaleen Dempsey, RNIB (Children, Young People and Families)
6. Niall Foley, Guide Dogs Scotland
7. Rhoda Grant MSP
8. Natasha Johnston, Visibility
9. Stephen Kerr MSP
10. Hawys Kilday, Sight Scotland
11. Rod Murchison
12. Paul O'Kane MSP
13. Hussein Patwa
14. Amira Petrescu, Police Scotland
15. Nicoletta Primo, Sight Scotland and Sight Scotland Veterans
16. Alison Rae, Dundee Blind & Partially Sighted Society
17. Susan Robinson

## Agenda item 1 - Welcome, introductions and apologies

Stuart McMillan MSP welcomed everyone to the first meeting of the group in 2022. Introductions and apologies were acknowledged, and the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) statement was read.

## Agenda item 2 - Approval of minutes

The minutes of the meeting 8 December 2021 were proposed by Terry Robinson and seconded by Gillian Mitchell. No amendments were made.

## Agenda item 3 - Matters arising

It was confirmed the action points from the previous meeting have all been progressed.

Responses to the rehabilitation point will be circulated.

It was acknowledged that it is necessary to allow time for Local Authorities to respond to the Traffic Light query and the summary responses will be circulated in due course.

There were no new matters arising.

## Agenda item 4 - Accessible voting

### Ken Reid

Ken Reid shared his own personal experiences of accessible voting. This was a version of the presentation he made to the Electoral Commission in Scotland/Electoral Management Board for Scotland Workshop for Returning Officers in January 2022.

Ken thanked the CPG for the opportunity to present and acknowledged that the presentation reflected his own experience only and was not presented as the be all and end all on accessible voting.

Only five per cent of blind people have no sight at all; many people have some vision and are often able to read large print etc, therefore one size does not fit all in terms of accessible voting. For example, audio could be incorporated and used with the Tactile Voting Device (TVD), or a combination of other configurations such as Braille which some sight impaired people may prefer.

Ken spoke about his recent experience in the December 2019 general election. After he voted he asked to have the vote checked and found he had inadvertently spoiled the ballot paper by marking outside of the box. The TVD had been issued without any guidance but both horizontal and vertical alignment is required for the device to fit correctly over the ballot paper. It should not be up to the voter to point out these issues. The spoiled paper was cited in RNIB's Turned 2019 report on the 2019 UK general election.

At the 2021 Scottish Parliament elections Ken again required the assistance of staff at the polling station so his right to vote independently in secrecy was removed. The TVD could be as good as anything else, but it needs to be positioned properly for it to work.

Ken said that this was an example of a blind voter bringing a bit of excitement to the polling booth staff day.

### George Adam MSP, Minister for Parliamentary Business

George Adam MSP, Minister for Parliamentary Business gave an update on the Scottish Government's approach to accessible voting

solutions. He appreciated the opportunity to present to the group and said that he understood some of the difficulties in respect of accessible voting due to personal experience. It is now in his remit to challenge and address to seek resolution of these issues.

Some Scottish Government projects and pilots have had to be postponed due to the pandemic. However, the government is still committed to move forward and have been working with both partner organisations and key stakeholders to try to find a solution.

George Adam attended the accessible voting event at Forth Valley Sensory Centre, which trialled the use of audio devices with the TVD. He is optimistic that the government will be able to resolve the matter and is happy to look at other technological solutions so long as they are safe and secure, and the public still have faith in the vote.

He said that he used a postal vote personally which mitigates some of the difficulties at the polling stations but also acknowledged there was a superstitious element to his choice.

He is aware of some of the electoral projects in Wales and Northern Ireland and has good relationships with colleagues in Wales so is hopeful we can draw on experiences elsewhere in Scotland. The approach is one of partnership to work together to find solutions.

The Scottish Government will launch a consultation on Electoral Reform soon and George Adam MSP encourages people to take part in it.

## Sarah Mackie of Electoral Commission in Scotland

Sarah Mackie of Electoral Commission in Scotland gave an update on Scottish local government election preparations.

The Electoral Commission has a new statutory duty to report on the steps which Returning Officers took to support accessibility at Scottish Parliamentary and Council elections. The Commission wrote to all Returning Officers in Scotland after the Scottish Parliament elections in 2021 and asked them about the steps they had taken to support those with additional needs.

The feedback data demonstrated that disabled voters were slightly less likely to say that they found it easy to access elections. More specific individual feedback highlighted visually impaired voters arriving at polling

stations and when asking for a TVD finding that the polling staff were not aware of these devices or were not trained in their use.

It was highlighted that due to the pandemic there was a significant increase in fresh staff at polling stations last year and some of those working in polling stations for the first time may have been Presiding Officers.

The Electoral Commission has been working with the Electoral Management Board in Scotland on to how to resolve this issue. They held a training session with all Returning Officers amounting to around 200 staff across Scotland. Ken Reid presented at the training and feedback was very positive.

The Commission is also working with Sight Scotland, RNIB Scotland and Guide Dogs Scotland to develop information which is targeted towards blind and partially sighted voters to try to ascertain what is needed and impose a requirement for it to be provided.

There is the facility to use a postcode checker to display local candidates in the order they appear on the ballot paper in an accessible format on the Electoral Commission website. [Added post-meeting - This can be found at [www.electoralcommission.org.uk/i-am-a/voter/your-election-information](http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/i-am-a/voter/your-election-information).] The Commission is working with Scottish Government to make this service more widely available and known.

Sarah pointed out Returning Officers cannot fix things if they are not aware of a problem and therefore urged people to please report to her, a Returning Officer, or Local Authority.

The Electoral Commission will be carrying out a Disabled Access Survey after the Scottish local elections - please share widely!

Question and Answer session followed:

Stuart McMillan MSP asked Sarah if there were additional polling stations and an increase in polling staff last year due to the pandemic. Sarah responded that the same number of polling places were in operation but was unsure of staff numbers.

Colette Walker asked a question in relation to her son's vote. Her son is disabled both registered blind and has autism. Colette asked what the legal stance would be with regards to her voting on her son's behalf if he

does not have capacity to do so himself. Sarah Mackie from the Electoral Commission commented that whilst everyone should be registered to vote as capacity can change, Power of Attorney has no bearing on voting and advised Colette to seek clarification on her individual circumstances via her Electoral Registration Office.

Gill Syme from Optometry Scotland noted some of the issues with voting appear to be training issues with polling station staff and asked if there is standard mandatory training everyone should receive from the outset. Gill further asked Ken Reid if he thought the TVD was the best solution. Ken responded that he believes it can work and is suitable for the job but was not failsafe. TVDs offered must cover the ballot paper and cited an example of finding 14 parties on the ballot paper but only 10 flaps on the device, thus omitting four parties. George Adam MSP commented that alternatives may be piloted soon in the UK.

Councillor Sheila Hands commented it was easier for her to be elected than it has been to vote independently. She has no confidence in the TVDs on their own. She found that putting an X in the correct box is impossible as the flaps usually slip after reading both the left and right sides. She asked if we need a more accessible voting booth to be available in polling stations or accessible polling stations although people may not wish to travel further afield to vote. She also asked if it would be possible to raise the boxes on the ballot papers. This combined with an electronic or braille list of the candidates might come together to result in the solution.

Terry Robinson said that in simple terms the purpose of the exercise is to mark an X on a piece of paper. The emphasis should be on a universal paper. We need something that will work across the board, without being overcomplicated. Sarah Mackie commented that a new universal ballot paper would involve legislation and any ballot paper would indeed have to be the same for all to protect anonymity.

George Adam MSP said that he had spoken to Terry at the Forth Valley Sensory Centre accessible voting event last year and is interested in looking at Terry's idea of one universal ballot paper. The Consultation on Electoral Reform will give a chance to collect comprehensive feedback and facilitate change.

Terry Robinson highlighted there is no provision for a blind person living alone to conduct a postal vote. Stuart McMillan MSP encouraged Terry to feed this back during the consultation and asked if additional time to

vote would be advantageous. Terry replied that an accessible ballot paper is the answer.

Phillipa Mason stated that count staff are required to undertake three to five hours mandatory training and asked if polling staff have the same mandatory training. Sarah Mackie replied that the Electoral Commission would expect that all polling staff need training. However, they do not regulate this training. Furthermore, if the training was virtual, it would be more difficult to show staff how to use the TVDs. Each Local Authority has responsibility for their own training.

Mhari Thurston thanked the contributors and noted Terry's point on inclusive design. If this can be done with bank notes, then why not for voting? George Adam MSP acknowledged that the government need to find the correct solution and is very open to discussion.

James Newman from the Scottish Government Elections Team highlighted that the pilot taking place in Wales was on having central accessible voting stations place where staff are confident and trained. The Elections Team will be engaging with colleagues in the Welsh Government.

Colin Smyth MSP acknowledged that Covid has had impact on the timescale for the trials in Scotland but wondered when these were now scheduled to take place. George Adam MSP stated there are no planned pilots coming up for May 2022 elections, but the government is committed, and pilots are likely to take place in the next few years.

## Agenda item 5 - Future CPGVI topics

Stuart McMillan MSP stated the results of the poll on topics for future Cross Party Group meetings had been circulated in advance. The top choices were as follows:

- Specialist education of children with visual impairment - 10
- Employment including employability programmes and the employment gap for blind and partially sighted people – 9
- The shortage of rehabilitation officers - 6
- Accessible information – 5
- See Hear Strategy – update from Scottish Government on what has been achieved to date and what the plans are for the future - 5
- Transport - 5



The group agreed future topics should reflect the results of the poll.

## Agenda item 6 - Any other competent business

6.1. Cllr Sheila Hands said that with regards to accessible information people should be aware that the Scottish Government is consulting on the Public Sector Equality Duty in Scotland [consultation closed 7 March 2022]. The Consultation includes a new duty on relevant public bodies to develop accessible and inclusive communications. [Post-meeting information - the responses to this consultation will then inform subsequent amendment to the regulation with the Scottish Government intending that any regulatory changes will come into force in 2025.]

**Action: The consultation document will be circulated to the CPG via Catriona [Pdf version attached with the minutes.]**

6.2. Colette Walker asked if the Census will be available as an accessible online form or only in paper format. Laura Jones said Census is available online and RNIB Scotland is working with Census Scotland team.

**Action: A link to the online Census page should be included with the minutes, please therefore find this below.**

[Scotland Census 2022](#)

6.3. Sandra Wilson had noted an AOCB in advance of the meeting, however as the meeting overran Sandra had to leave without being able to raise this.

**Action: Sandra Wilson to send details via Catriona.**

## Agenda item 7 - Date of next meeting

Tuesday 10 May, 18:00 – 19:00 - Maree Todd MSP, Minister for Public Health, Women's Health and Sport, has confirmed her attendance at the CPGVI.

As things stand this meeting will be held virtually, it is still to be confirmed if cross party groups will be able to meet in person. Hybrid meetings are not possible as CPGs are not classed as parliamentary business and as such there is no support available to offer a hybrid meeting. It was agreed if face to face is an option, the group would vote on whether to meet virtually or in person.