Cross Party Group on Visual Impairment in the Scottish Parliament

Minutes of the Cross Party Group on Visual Impairment meeting held on Tuesday 6 February in Committee Room 3, Scottish Parliament

Members present:

Stuart McMillan MSP; James Adams, RNIB Scotland; Richard Baker, Royal Blind; Paul Bartley, Optelec; Colin Beattie MSP; Neil Bibby MSP; Catriona Burness, RNIB Scotland; Campbell Chalmers, RNIB Scotland; Maggie Chapman, SCOVI; Matthew Clark, Haggeye; Ian Clement; Jane Donnelly, Connect Radio; Anne Marie Fleming, RNIB Scotland; Chris Highcock, Scottish Electoral Management Board; Carl Hodson, Fife Society for the Blind; Caitlin Howie, RNIB Scotland; Bob Ironside, Vision PK; Sheila Mackenzie, Scottish Sensory Centre; Sarah Mackie, The Electoral Commission; Maureen Macmillan, Sight Action; Michael McMahon, Disability Agenda Scotland; Andrew McTaggart, City of Edinburgh Council; Linda Middlemist, Guide Dogs Scotland; Gillian Mitchell, Sight Action; Gavin Neate, Neatebox; Ken Reid, RNIB Scotland; Ann Robertson, North East Sensory Services; Sheila Rogers, Fife Society for the Blind; Allan Russell, Connect Radio; Kirin Saeed; Fiona Sandford, Visionary; Louise Scott, Scottish Government; Colin Smyth MSP; Jayne Stuart, Visibility; Julie Thomson; Liz Ure, Scottish Government; Cate Vallis, RNIB Scotland; Sandra Wilson, RNIB Scotland.

1.   Welcome and Introductions
Stuart McMillan MSP welcomed everyone to the meeting.

2.   Apologies
Elaine Brackenridge, Royal Blind School; Amanda Burt, RNIB Scotland; Marion Butchart, Novartis; Graham Cormack, EyeCare Scotland; Helen Court, Sight Action; Jamie Cuthbertson, Macular Society; John Donaldson, Scottish Braille Press; Dominic Everett, Royal Blind School; Niall Foley, Guide Dogs Scotland; John Furze, Macular Society; Colin Gallagher, Guide Dogs Scotland; Mairi Graham; Jane Horsburgh, Guide Dogs Scotland; Cleo Jones, City of Edinburgh Council; Terry Moody, RNIB Scotland; Rod Murchison; Mary Rasmussen; Professor John Ravenscroft; Susan Robinson, Tiscali; Terry Robinson, RNIB Scotland; Angela Russell, Royal Blind School; Janelle

Scotland, Association; Cirta Tooth, NHS Lothian; Mary Travers; Colette Walker.

3. Minutes of the AGM and meeting held on 5 December 2017

The minutes from the last meeting held on 5 December were proposed by Ken Reid and seconded by Fiona Sandford.

4. Matters Arising

4.1. John Swinney MSP, Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills, has been contacted regarding the release of Professor John Ravenscroft's report on QTVI provision.

5. Future CPG topics

The poll for future CPG topics was circulated, with 34 members responding.

Mental health received the most votes, followed by employment of blind and partially sighted people, Street Charter/inclusive street design, health and social care integration, low vision services, accessible health information/appointment cancellations and the See Hear Strategy. Alternative topics were also proposed, such as habilitation and rehabilitation whilst the COG already agreed that education should feature among the CPG topics.

Stuart McMillan and Catriona Burness will design future agendas based on the results.

6. Session on Electoral Reform

Louise Scott spoke to the group and thanked them for the opportunity to speak. A consultation on Electoral Reform was launched on 19 December, closing on 12 March. Priorities covered are:
- Accessibility of voting
- Accessibility of Elected Office
- Electronic Voting
- List order of Candidates' names on ballot papers

Measures are already in place to ensure blind and partially sighted people are able to cast their vote accurately and securely, such as the tactile template, postal and proxy voting. The Access to Elected Office Fund provides grants to those with disabilities who wish to stand for election, with 15 candidates being successful last year.

Liz Ure updated the group on e-voting, noting that it can be implemented through two main ways, using electronic voting machines or online. The Scottish Government are keen to work with communities and specific groups to ensure any new technology is accessible and secure. There is evidence to suggest that listing candidates alphabetically gives an unfair advantage to those with names that start with letters towards the beginning of the alphabet. Suggestions on how to make this process fairer are welcome.

Chris Highcock thanked the group for inviting him to speak, and noted that while disabled people can ask for a companion or the Presiding Officer to accompany and assist them with voting, this compromises the secrecy of the ballot. Recommendations following a survey on accessible voting have been published, these are:

- Electoral stationery can contain too much jargon and be hard to read.
- It should be clear in legislation who is allowed to act as a companion.
- Voters should have a choice of where to vote, and request support at a specific time.
- Information from candidates should be available in all formats at the same time.
- Additional training for electoral administrators.
- Role of Carers / Support Workers to be established.

Stuart thanked the group for their input and highlighted that in the past weekend voting had been raised as a potential; however, this had been ruled out for religious reasons.

There was discussion around how to ensure those at the end of the alphabet were not disadvantaged as candidates. It was suggested that numbered lists be circulated in advance of an election, with these being reflected in the ballot papers/tactile templates/large print/braille versions. Voters would then be able to go to their polling station knowing which number(s) correspond to their chosen candidates, and be able to cast their vote anonymously. It was noted that the issue in relation to candidate order applies only to local government election which use the Single Transferable Vote (STV).

Gillian Mitchell noted that it might be possible to add icons, such as an eye for a visual impairment and an ear for a hearing impairment, to voters' records so all staff involved in the process would know what format each person requires. It was flagged however, that not everyone with sight loss is registered as blind or partially sighted so this information might not always be known.

Ian Clement suggested providing verbal instructions at the booth for those with hearing impairments.

Training of polling station staff was discussed, with officers keen to improve on sighted guiding, sign language and BSL provision.

Electoral Commission guidance on support at polling stations is available online and the link will be sent to Catriona for circulating. Kirin Saeed noted that using real stories as case studies in training will make a difference, and encourage best practice.

Action
- Electoral Commission polling station support link to be sent to Catriona for circulating.

7. AOCB

7.1. Frequency of meetings: Ian Clement queried over whether members should be kept up to date with progress on eyecare matters in between meetings. Stuart noted that any member of the CPG can make contact with their MSPs to raise particular issues.

8. Dates of future meetings
- Tuesday 8 May, 18:00 – 19:30, Clerk Maxwell Room, CR4
- Tuesday 11 September, 13:00 – 14:30, Fleming Room, CR3
- Tuesday 4 December, 18:00 – 19:30, Fleming Room, CR3