

# **Cross Party Group on Visual Impairment in the Scottish Parliament**

**#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.

## **Minutes of the Cross-Party Group on Visual Impairment meeting held on Wednesday 9 September, 15.00 - 16.30, Virtual Meeting via Microsoft Teams**

**Present: See annex.**

### **1. Welcome and introductions.**

Convener of CPGVI Stuart McMillan MSP welcomed members to the first virtual meeting and asked members to put forward any queries about this new set up to the CPG Secretary Catriona Burness.

Stuart McMillan MSP welcomed our new MSP member, Jeremy Balfour MSP.

### **Action point**

1. The CPG Secretary to seek feedback on holding the meeting via Teams.

**Apologies: See annex.**

### **2. Panel Discussion - Accessible Voting**

**Graeme Dey MSP, Minister for Parliamentary Business and Veterans - Implementation of the Scottish Elections (Reform) Act; and - Accessible voting prototype, including audio-described video presentation**

The Minister began his presentation by explaining his ministerial responsibilities, which includes giving people the confidence to vote and participate in the voting process and preparations for the May 2021 Scottish Parliament elections.

The Minister said he was struck by the challenges highlighted in RNIB's research on blind and partially sighted people's experiences of voting. He emphasised that the Scottish Government is very supportive of the objective of improving the accessibility of voting for people with sight loss. Any changes will of course need to be carefully considered to ensure these are worthwhile and that there are no unintended consequences. He also recognised that the community's needs were varied and that no single solution would work for everyone. One potential option is a remote ballot paper marking solution. The Scottish Government have created a prototype which he hoped could help at least some people to vote independently and in secret. While this project is at an early stage Mr Dey said he was keen to seek feedback on it from people with sight loss.

A video was shown which explained how the remote ballot paper marking solution is intended to work. It has been designed primarily to enable people with sight loss to vote using a remote digital voting solution, which has the advantage that voters would be able to use audio to interact with the ballot paper and can confirm that their vote has been recorded as they intended. However, the prototype is not a typical online voting solution, since it has been designed with the intention of the vote being encrypted into a secure code which is then printed rather than being submitted online. This aspect of the design is intended to address the very understandable concerns many stakeholders have about the security of online voting as well as to address the very important need to ensure votes are kept secret. The intention is to provide a range of options for voters to return the vote, for example by printing and returning it by post or by downloading it to a phone and taking it to a variety of locations where it can be printed and returned to the Council.

The video can be accessed at <https://vimeo.com/453666637> - please note that it cannot be viewed on Internet Explorer but displays on Google Chrome and Microsoft Edge.

The Minister finished by saying that trials for the prototype had been delayed due to the coronavirus pandemic. However, trials will be conducted when coronavirus restrictions allow, and he will be looking for

feedback about the strengths and weaknesses of the voting prototype and on how it could be improved.

### **James Adams, RNIB Scotland Director - RNIB's User Experience Team's first thoughts on accessible voting solutions**

James Adams opened by stating that accessible voting is a priority for RNIB. Research by RNIB on the 2017 general election, "Turned Out", found that only one in four blind and partially sighted voters could vote independently and in secret.

RNIB Scotland is delighted that amendments placed by the Minister at stage three of the Scottish Elections (Reform) Bill were passed, and by the work that government is now doing to pilot accessible voting methods.

One solution that RNIB has been looking into is audio files to assist voting. These audio files would be used in conjunction with a tactile voting device and read out the names, parties and number on the ballot paper of the candidates for the voter.

RNIB ran a trial using audio along with a tactile voting device, via both apps and an audio player, with blind and partially sighted voters. None of the participants in the trial had problems using the USB player to play the audio file and vote successfully. Participants received an audio player, a USB stick containing the audio file, headphones and the tactile voting device. The tactile voting device is stuck over the ballot paper, the voter listens to the audio file as many times as they would like and makes their mark according to who they wish to vote for.

Participants reported advantages of using an audio device as opposed to having someone reading out the candidates including greater privacy and not taking up any time of any polling station staff especially if they wanted to read the information several times.

Dependent on coronavirus restrictions allowing, RNIB Scotland is organising a trial of the audio device method in October in partnership with the Forth Valley Sensory Centre. This is to test this method out with the ballot papers reflecting the variety of voting systems used at elections in Scotland.

The trial will inform work on accessible voting, checking for any practical issues that participants have with the audio device and how confident they feel voting in this way.

### **Sarah Mackie, Electoral Commission in Scotland - Support from the Electoral Commission to deliver accessible voting in Scotland**

Sarah Mackie stated that the voting process is an area that the Commission cares about. Everyone should have the right to vote independently and in secret, but research conducted by the Commission showed that people don't always have the capacity to vote without assistance. The Commission is currently looking at the proposals put forward by the Scottish Elections (Reform) Act and what this practically means in terms of accessibility.

The Electoral Commission conducted a survey during the 2019 UK general election in 2019 which gathered evidence from people with sight loss about their experiences of voting. This survey demonstrated that there are still issues arising. For example, blind and partially sighted people reported that they had to ask for help during the voting process which raised a big issue about secrecy.

Sarah read out a quote from one of the survey respondents:

“I use this tactile voting template, but I don't really know what happens to my vote afterwards because I'm relying on someone to do this for me.”

In addition, postal votes were found not to be secret, as people with a visual impairment had to ask for assistance to fill this in.

There is still more work to be done about the materials available in polling stations; it is the responsibility of staff to tell people what options are available. Equally, if people with sight loss don't know certain materials exist then they won't know to request it.

As the Commission moves forward with this work, there is a greater need for information to be available in accessible formats - in particular, information about the candidates before the voting process and about the political parties. The Commission believes strongly in working in partnership with governmental bodies and organisations, to understand the need for accessible information.

### **3. Questions and discussion**

Stuart McMillan MSP asked the Minister, as the video showed that when the information was sent back to local authorities (LAs), the LA would then print out the ballot paper, whether this meant that the ballot paper would be different for people with a visual impairment compared to the rest of the general public.

Liz Ure from the Scottish Government Elections Team explained that there are various possibilities for printing votes. At this early stage the focus is on trialling the prototype with people who have sight loss to see if it is something worth taking forward. Areas like printing and security would be looked at in more detail in a future phase of development, if work is taken forward but it is in theory possible to print the vote using exactly the same ballot paper as other voters use.

Stuart McMillan asked James Adams if use of the audio format would prohibit randomised voting.

James Adams replied that if voting was randomised, there would have to be audio recordings for each version. Voters with a visual impairment could request the audio for their version of the ballot paper at the polling station.

Stuart McMillan informed Sarah Mackie that he would certainly encourage all the political parties to ensure that the information about elections and candidates is accessible.

Maureen McAllister asked if there is a level of print quality needed to make sure it works effectively if someone printed off the QR code at home. There needs to be some guidance about this. There should be screen reader information about how to use the programme.

Mr Dey said he expected the QR code quality required would be like, for example, what is needed for printing airplane tickets at home. More broadly, it is important to ensure the accessible voting solution is refined to reflect actual lived experience, including ensuring it works with different screen readers.

Ken Reid commented that the Scottish Government system looks helpful and asked, if you wish to use this system, is the letter, containing the QR code, sent to the person's home? He also asked whether the ballot paper could be printed at the polling station if you use the online version.

He added that the only issue is the polling station staff and their lack of knowledge. Despite the positive comments about polling staff mentioned by the Electoral Commission, he had found that they did not have the knowledge and training is needed.

The Minister agreed that people had mixed experiences of going into a polling station to vote. A lot of the staff only work on polling day, so they have limited time for training. He undertook to raise this matter personally with the Electoral Management Board for Scotland to explore how best to ensure that best practice is implemented and to write to Ken to get feedback.

Liz Ure said that the possibility of a solution that would enable the QR code to be dropped off at a polling station could be explored.

On training for polling station staff, Sarah Mackie asked anyone who had had negative experiences at the polling station to get in touch with the Electoral Management Board. The other thing we have started looking at are videos for people who have difficulties in voting. We have filmed people's experiences as part of training for polling staff. We are happy to work with other people to ensure that we're capturing the right messages for staff on voting day.

Terry Robinson said he was uncomfortable with using words like "adapting" and "adding things" when talking about accessibility. He suggested there is a need for a universal ballot paper. This could have the left-hand corner taken off and have notches down the right-hand side to mark the limits of each box. Other media such as audio/braille would tell people which box to tick. With this system people could vote independently and secretly. He asked if this could be looked at from the ground up, building on a more universal system before considering providing something special.

The Minister said that nothing is being ruled out. However, what struck him about the proposal to remove the left-hand corner of the ballot paper is there was not huge support for it. He did not rule it out but emphasised that usability and practical issues around printing and processing would need to be considered.

Marion Butchart said COVID-19 has raised fundamental issues for people with a visual impairment so it was necessary to find better ways to do things. She referred to a device attached to glasses which can

read out text and asked if this was something we could look at for voting, along with other Artificial Intelligence adaptations?

Mr Dey said he was sure there are a range of improvements that could be considered to reflect COVID-19, and this should inform thinking. For example, we need to think more about the layout of polling stations to make them more accessible. This is being looked at in planning for the 2021 Scottish Parliament elections. The Minister invited people who have identified potential solutions to write to him with their suggestions.

James Adams identified the device referred to by Marion Butchart as an Israeli invention, OrCam glasses. The technology is new and currently expensive, but over time it will become more accessible for people and could potentially be trialled.

[For information, the OrCam device has two parts. A lightweight camera clips onto the wearer's glasses and uses audio feedback to relay visual information (through speech) to the user.]

Phillipa Mason asked how audio and tactile markings would work in terms of marking preferences in STV voting? And how will this work in terms of mistakes?

James replied that if you're doing local government STV voting, it may take a little longer to complete your vote, but it'll be the same process. If the voter makes a mistake there might be a provision for a new ballot paper to be given to them.

Sarah Mackie agreed that preferential STV voting could be difficult to do.

Richard Baker welcomed all the efforts to move this area forward. He highlighted the importance of using good audio interfaces for the remote ballot paper marking solution and noted there is software available that could make the solution easier to access for older people. He would be happy to share information on these.

The Minister said it was important that solutions worked for as many people as possible and the plan was to undertake trials in a variety of settings to ensure that a range of useful feedback was obtained. He welcomed Mr Baker's offer and asked his officials to get in touch with Mr Baker directly to discuss this further.

Mr Dey was asked if voters with sight loss would be involved in shaping future work.

Mr Dey said that it is essential to capture lived experience to keep solutions impactful and that voters with sight loss would continue be involved. He noted that a longer-term view was needed given the pandemic. The need for piloting and testing would mean developments could not be expected before 2022 and possibly later. But he emphasised the commitment to continuing this important work as circumstances allowed.

The Convener thanked all the speakers and the Minister.

### **Action points arising from the presentations and discussion**

1. Graeme Dey asked his officials to follow up on points with some members - Maureen McAllister (printing of QPR code), Ken Reid (training for polling staff), Terry Robinson (ballot papers) and Richard Baker (software).
2. Sarah Mackie of the Electoral Commission in Scotland would like to share her contacts and Catherine Heggie's contacts with the CPG membership.
3. Following the meeting Terry Robinson provided a summary of his proposal for a universally accessible ballot paper:

I'd like to see a bit of "Inclusive Design" introduced into our election process. As an example, a standard book of first or second-class stamps has either one or two small notches in the top right-hand corner. This immediately tells me the value of the stamps and which way up they are.

Let's adopt a similar principle for our ballot papers. These would be standard, for all to use! If the top-left-hand corner is removed, we can orient the paper correctly. If we have notches down the right-hand side indicating the top and bottom of each box, we could consistently mark our paper as we'd like.

The only non-standard part of this exercise would be the Braille, audio or whatever alternative media lists the order of candidates in the ballot.



Whilst I support electronic voting in principle, I strongly oppose systems that are put in place to serve a minority. These inevitably don't attract the attention and investment they require and so are just something else that would cost money and could go wrong.

A universally accessible ballot paper needn't cost more than what's already present and would be catered for by existing systems.

#### **4. [at 16.00] AGM and Election of Office Bearers**

- Convener
- Vice-Convener
- Secretariat

Stuart McMillan MSP, Neil Bibby MSP and RNIB Scotland were re-elected as Convener, Vice-Convener and Secretariat of CPGVI respectively.

#### **5. Minutes of the joint meeting of Cross-Party Group on Accident Prevention and Safety Awareness and the Cross-Party Group on Visual Impairment held on 5 February 2020**

No points were raised. The minutes were proposed by Colette Walker and seconded by Alan Stewart and agreed.

#### **6. Matters arising from meeting of 5 February**

The Convener reported that as a matter arising from the minutes, Emma Harper MSP will forward some information on technological developments in the United States on road signage for circulation to the CPG membership.

#### **7. Any other competent business (AOCB)**

Claire Forde spoke about her role as an MYSP, working with Haggeye and as a member of the RNIB Scotland Committee. She had successfully moved a motion in the Scottish Youth Parliament about making sight loss awareness training mandatory in schools, universities and places of work. The first action of the campaign asks people to tweet their local MSP to raise awareness of the issues posed and she asked for support from CPGVI members.

Colette Walker underlined that there is a need to ensure that access to education is made accessible before sight loss training. Ken Reid asked if it was intended for the Scottish Government or HR policies to

implement the training. Claire Forde replied that the aim was to implement it in HR policies so that employers know how to support people with sight loss.

### **Action points**

1. Claire Forde encouraged the group to tweet their local MSPs using #TagAndTell to promote mandatory vision and sight loss awareness training in schools, universities and places of work.

2. Anne-Marie Barry and Jacquie Winning didn't get a chance to put their question on mandatory sight loss training so the Secretary will put them in contact with Claire Forde and Rosie Pybus. The Secretary will also put Colette Walker in touch with Rosie Pybus.

**8. Date of next meeting to be confirmed by the Secretary and Convener.**

## **ANNEX: SEDERUNT**

### **Present**

#### **MSP CPG members**

Jeremy Balfour MSP

Neil Bibby MSP

Stuart McMillan MSP

Colin Smyth MSP

#### **Panel speakers**

James Adams, Director, RNIB Scotland

Graeme Dey MSP, Minister for Parliamentary Business and Veterans

Sarah Mackie, Electoral Commission in Scotland

#### **Observers**

Lauchlan Hall, Elections Team, Scottish Government

Catherine Heggie, Electoral Commission in Scotland

Maria McCann, Head of Elections Team, Scottish Government

Kathy Rundle, RNIB

Liz Ure, Elections Team, Scottish Government

Mike Wordingham, RNIB

#### **CPG members attending**

1. Richard Baker, Royal Blind and Scottish War Blinded
2. Anne-Marie Barry, Guide Dogs Scotland
3. Liz Bates, Microphthalmia, Anophthalmia & Coloboma Support (MACS)
4. Catriona Burness, RNIB Scotland
5. Sally Cameron, seescape
6. Hilary Davies
7. Niall Foley, Guide Dogs Scotland
8. Claire Forde, Haggeye and Member of the Scottish Youth Parliament
9. Amanda Foster
10. Laura Gray, Macular Society
11. Laura Jones, RNIB Scotland
12. Emma Kellacher, Optometry Scotland
13. Maureen McAllister, versusarthritis
14. Gwenn McCreath, Vision PK
15. Lindsay McDowall, Visibility

16. Dr Hazel McFarlane, Macular Society
17. Philippa Mason, Glaucoma UK
18. Gillian Mitchell, Sight Action
19. Councillor Robert Mooney
20. Rosie Pybus, RNIB Scotland
21. Professor John Ravenscroft, University of Edinburgh
22. Ken Reid, UK Vision Ambassador
23. Anne Robertson, NESS
24. Terry Robinson, RNIB Scotland Committee
25. Sheila Rogers, seescape
26. Allan Russell, RNIB Connect Radio
27. Kirin Saeed, RNIB Scotland Committee
28. Janelle Scotland, Association of Scottish Talking  
Newspapers (ASTN)
29. Angus Scott, NHS Forth Valley
30. Davina Shiell, Royal Blind and Scottish War Blinded
31. Brenda Smart, Sight Action
32. Alan Stewart
33. Colette Walker
34. Laura Walker, Visibility
35. Cate Vallis, RNIB Scotland

## **Apologies**

1. Helen Court, NHS Education for Scotland
2. John Donaldson, Scottish Braille Press
3. John Furze, Macular Society
4. Rhoda Grant MSP
5. Carl Hodson, seescape
6. Louise Hunter, Visibility
7. Emma Kellacher, Optometry Scotland
8. Sheila Mackenzie, Scottish Sensory Centre, University of  
Edinburgh
9. Jacqueline McGuire, Angus Council
10. Hussein Patwa
11. Susan Robinson
12. Hal Rollason, Optometry Scotland
13. Fiona Sandford, Visionary
14. Ken Swa, RNIB Scotland Committee
15. Sandra Wilson, RNIB Scotland