



# Tackling unemployment for blind and partially sighted people

Summary findings from a three-year research project  
(ENABLER)

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supporting blind and  
partially sighted people



**Action** for blind people

Part of **RNIB** Group



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# Executive summary

## What we did

Between 2010 and 2013, RNIB and the University of Birmingham carried out a three-year, action-based research project to help improve the employment prospects of blind and partially sighted people. Working alongside a group of employment specialists and approximately 100 blind and partially sighted people, we designed and tested:

- a standard assessment model that has increased our understanding of the skills, aspirations and barriers to employment of blind and partially sighted people
- innovative support strategies for those furthest from the labour market, which has helped inform how we deliver services for blind and partially sighted people seeking work.

## Why we did it

Blind and partially sighted people are significantly less likely to be in paid employment than the general population or other disabled people. Only one in three registered blind and partially sighted people of working age is in paid employment. They are nearly five times more likely than the general population to have had no paid work for five years.

Blind and partially sighted people need specialist support on their journey towards employment. In addition to more common barriers, such as long term unemployment or low literacy and numeracy levels, blind and partially sighted job seekers have specific needs related to their sight loss.

## What we found

We identified key factors that determine a blind or partially sighted person's distance from the labour market, and whether they are ready for work.

Examples of those factors include:

- being able to self-advocate to employers, explaining what workplace adjustments will be required to carry out particular roles
- confidence and competence using computers adapted with appropriate assistive technology software
- confidence and ability to travel independently using public transport
- access to information via a preferred format of braille, large print, audio or electronic information.

We have shown that blind and partially sighted people furthest from the labour market require intensive support and specialist interventions in key areas.

These include:

- developing assistive technology skills
- developing mobility skills
- skills to communicate needs and associated adjustments to employers
- making the most of residual vision
- a pre-employment programme, designed to meet the complex needs of blind and partially sighted people.



## What we produced

We have developed a comprehensive **employment assessment toolkit** that takes account of the specific needs of blind and partially sighted job seekers. It supports employment advisers and their clients to design interventions that help blind and partially sighted people on their path towards employment.

The employment assessment toolkit enables employment advisers, who work with blind and partially sighted people to gain a clear understanding of their clients' aspirations in relation to employment, and what types of support and development are required. It can be used by any provider working in the welfare to work industry that supports blind and partially sighted people.

Trials of the employment assessment toolkit and innovative support strategies provided evidence of the effectiveness of a holistic and specialist employment service for people with sight loss. The toolkit was proven to be an important part of such a service and helps employment advisors, clients and managers to:

- establish a profile of each client's particular skills and barriers
- identify and design effective interventions which are sensitive to the complex needs and circumstances of people with sight loss
- plan a tailored pre-employment programme
- establish a baseline, which can be compared with a reassessment following intervention
- record evidence of measurable success towards paid employment
- acknowledge and celebrate other meaningful outcomes such as greater independence, or contribution and participation through voluntary work
- gather information about the range and number of clients being supported at different levels of need.

The new employment assessment toolkit is helping the RNIB group of charities to re-model the way it delivers pre-employment support with blind and partially sighted people. Designed to assess the particular issues faced by blind and partially sighted people, it serves as a diagnostic tool and is useful for planning the steps required to progress towards work. The RNIB group of charities is embedding the employment assessment toolkit as part of our support to working-age people. Our use of this standardised assessment model means that our pre-employment support for blind and partially sighted people will be even more closely aligned to the specific needs of those we support.



# 1. Introduction

The ENABLER project was a three-year research project funded by Big Lottery Fund aimed at improving the employment prospects of blind and partially sighted people. The project was delivered by RNIB, Action for Blind People (Action) and the Visual Impairment Centre for Teaching and Research (VICTAR) at the University of Birmingham between 2010 and 2013.

This report presents the project's key findings and a summary of its main activities and impact. More comprehensive accounts, which track each phase of the project, can be found in three technical reports:

- Part one outlines the theoretical framework, methodology and policy context for the project (Saunders et al, 2012).
- Part two describes the first research trial of the emerging employment assessment toolkit (Douglas et al, 2012).
- Part three concentrates on the second research trial, which involved testing new support strategies for people furthest from the labour market, and further refinement of the assessment toolkit (Douglas et al, 2013).

## 1.1 Background

Blind and partially sighted people are significantly less likely to be in paid employment than the general population or other disabled people (Hewett, 2013). Only one in three registered blind and partially sighted people of working age is in paid employment. They are nearly five times more likely than the general population to have had no paid work for five years. Those with a degree or higher award still only have the same chance of getting a job as someone with no qualifications in the general population (Douglas et al, 2009). Perhaps this is unsurprising, when nine out of ten employers rate blind and partially sighted people as either “difficult” or “impossible” to employ (DWP, 2004).

Blind and partially sighted people face specific, additional barriers to finding work due to the functional impact of sight loss, such as:

- access to job seeking information
- accessibility of online resources
- a lack of readily available mobility training
- the cost and availability of assistive technology equipment and software and the availability of training.

These barriers can be further compounded by other factors, such as:

- the isolating effects of sight loss
- low educational attainment
- a lengthy unemployment history
- additional disabilities and mental health problems
- a lack of confidence in themselves and in employers to recognise their potential.

RNIB and Action have worked hard to support blind and partially sighted people to respond to these barriers. A notable example is the Work Focus project (2008–2010), which was established after a group of private sector chief executives recommended that RNIB design a service that focused on building the employability of blind and partially sighted people whilst simultaneously stimulating demand amongst employers.

Work Focus Officers were free from eligibility restrictions and time limits normally associated with government-funded programmes. This open-door policy enabled staff to reach harder-to-employ people (those “furthest from the labour market”). Work Focus highlighted that blind and partially sighted people furthest from the labour market require more intensive support than those ready to move into work



(Hewett and Douglas, 2010). Categorising customers according to their need enabled staff to tailor services or make appropriate referrals to other specialist providers.

A combination of bespoke training and referrals to other specialist service providers offering orientation and mobility training, access technology training, and low vision aids, enabled and empowered clients to access services they needed to enhance their ability to look for work. In addition, Work Focus clients taking part in group activities reported learning a great deal from one another. This reinforced the importance of peer-learning and the need for an organisation-wide peer support effort (Simkiss, 2010).

## **1.2 Aims of the project**

The two main aims of the ENABLER project were:

- to develop a standard assessment model and best practice guidelines that will increase our understanding of the skills, aspirations and barriers to employment of blind and partially sighted people
- to test innovative support strategies with a small number of people identified as furthest from the labour market, in order to inform the design of new service interventions that move people closer to employment.



## 2. What did we do?

Applying an action-based research approach, researchers from the University of Birmingham and RNIB worked in partnership with employment specialists and approximately 100 blind and partially sighted people in the design and testing of a new assessment model and support strategies for people furthest from the labour market.

### 2.1 Design an employment assessment toolkit

We used an iterative, feedback and evaluative approach to the design of the employment assessment toolkit to ensure that employment advisers and their clients were involved in the whole process. This ensured that the practical requirements of using the toolkit were considered carefully. The development of the toolkit included the following steps:

- A review of existing evidence from RNIB and from other research.
- Designing a methodology that included the views of stakeholders, ensuring that the outcomes from the research were relevant and positive for those participating – that is an action-based research approach was adopted.

- Extensive consultation with employment specialists across RNIB and Action, as well as focus group discussions with employment advisers and clients.
- Two significant trials of the employment assessment toolkit.

## 2.2 Develop new services and interventions

We undertook in-depth case studies of 14 blind and partially sighted clients working with employment advisers, to investigate the types of services and interventions that can support people furthest from the labour market to move closer to employment. The following steps were taken:

- Secondment of seven employment advisers committed to the project, based on their involvement in its earlier stages.
- Selection of 14 clients identified as furthest from the labour market, using the newly created employment assessment toolkit.
- The allocation of funds to support specific interventions based on individual action plans and monthly reviews of progress: for example mobility training, information technology (IT) training, voluntary work, and pre-employment courses.
- Comprehensive data collection methods, including adviser and client diaries (sometimes with the aid of voice recorders), employment adviser workshops and telephone interviews with clients.

Structuring the project in this way meant the newly designed employment assessment toolkit from the first half of the project could be used to identify clients for the second half of the project. The toolkit was further refined during the testing of services and new interventions, up to its launch in March 2013.



## **3. Employment assessment toolkit**

### **3.1 Description of the employment assessment toolkit**

The toolkit enables employment advisers who work with blind and partially sighted people to gain a clear understanding of their clients' aspirations in relation to employment, and what types of support and development are needed to help fulfil these aspirations. It can be used by any employment provider working in the welfare to work industry that supports blind and partially sighted people. The toolkit involves two related approaches.

Firstly, the questions contained within the toolkit are designed to generate assessment information, which helps the employment adviser and client to develop an appropriate action plan. The toolkit covers areas that blind and partially sighted people in this project and in other research have identified as barriers to gaining paid or voluntary work, such as mobility and accessing information. It also includes some questions that provide important context

information such as the clients' level of vision and general health. The questions in the toolkit are arranged under different sub-sections.

- Employment activity.
- Current job search activity.
- Access to information.
- Computer skills.
- Independent travel.
- Vision.
- Health related issues.
- Target job.

Secondly, some of the questions in the toolkit have a useful screening function to help understand a client's level of work-readiness using a segmentation model. The assigned level can be helpful to communicate to clients the steps they need to take that will help lead to paid or voluntary work. Employment advisers and their clients can review progress through these levels, as an indication of the progress clients have made over time. The different levels are:

- Level 1 – Work ready.
- Level 2 – Nearly work ready (closer).
- Level 3 – Nearly work ready (further).
- Level 4 – Longer term support needed.
- Level 5 – Foundation work required before employment services.

While the toolkit includes some challenging questions, it is designed to help clients assess where they are and to reflect upon where they want to be. It enables employment advisers to gather this information sensitively and efficiently. Trials in this project have shown that the toolkit can be helpful in a number of ways.

- It provides the employment adviser with an accurate profile of clients, based upon each individual's particular skills, barriers and personal circumstances.
- Blind and partially sighted people find it useful in helping them to get a clear sense of the scale of the challenges ahead. For some this can be daunting, but when coupled with the associated action plan the challenge can be broken down into achievable steps.
- Clients and employment advisers find it useful to revisit the assessment after a period of support because it can show the progress made.



- The assessment toolkit is very helpful as a management tool. It identifies different levels of need which could have an effect on the way support services are organised. An understanding of the range and numbers of clients being supported and their different levels of need could help with planning and justifying services to funding agencies.

## 3.2 How did we test the toolkit?

The development of the employment assessment toolkit involved extensive discussions with blind and partially sighted people and employment advisers. The work culminated with two major trials, each lasting approximately eight months. The toolkit was revised and improved as feedback was gathered.

### 3.2.1 First employment assessment toolkit trial

This first trial considered whether the questions in the toolkit delivered an accurate assessment of a client's skills and barriers in relation to employment. (Full details of that trial are outlined in Douglas et al, 2012.)

Twenty employment advisers voluntarily trialled the toolkit with 62 clients from nine service delivery teams across the RNIB group of charities, including all Action regional teams in England, RNIB Scotland, RNIB College Loughborough and the RNIB Trainee Grade Scheme. Employment advisers were positive about the approach taken and the purpose of the assessment. They agreed with the resulting level, that is client distance from the labour market, in about 50 per cent of cases.

The clients themselves were broadly positive about the aims, purpose and realisation of the assessment approach, and useful specific areas of development were raised. Constructive discussion about developing and improving the assessment model took place at stakeholders groups, employment adviser focus groups and through client representation at steering group meetings before the second trial.

**Challenging but I liked that... no point in asking unspecific questions but need to ask questions that get to the real difficulties I'm experiencing.**

(Client, Trial 1)

**It helped me to focus on existing skills and how I can transfer these skills to a new career.**

(Client, Trial 1)

### 3.2.2 Second employment assessment toolkit trial

In the first trial, some employment advisers were still using their existing methods for assessing clients, alongside testing the toolkit. In the second trial, employment advisers put to one side these other methods and only used the new assessment toolkit. Although the second trial involved a smaller group of clients, the exclusive use of the toolkit meant we gained a much greater understanding of how it could be embedded into future service development.

Segmentation levels were discussed with clients at the first and follow-up assessment interviews, and employment advisers attended specially convened workshops throughout the trial to help ensure a connection between client interventions and specific areas of the assessment toolkit. The action-based research approach used from the project's inception was further developed in the latter phases of the project.

Employment advisers were encouraged to **plan – implement – observe – reflect and review** their work by:

- carrying out an initial assessment with their clients using the freshly refined employment assessment toolkit
- co-developing action plans with clients, targeting intervention specifically in areas in which the client was found to be furthest from the labour market
- observing how their clients have been coping and meeting SMART goals through regular contact (mainly during weekly meetings)
- reflecting on their work using diaries
- reviewing the action plans and interventions to identify any areas that may need to be changed.

This process meant the assessment toolkit was continually checked and re-checked as clients progressed through the trial. Employment advisers mostly agreed with the segmentation levels generated by the initial and follow-up assessments during this phase. Yet it should be stressed that the professional judgement of employment advisers remained a critical part of the assessment process, because evidence suggests that other variables are important

predictors of the likelihood of employment. These include factors such as; age, level of residual vision, local job opportunities and disabilities other than sight loss.

**The workshops have been a good forum to share experiences, realise we have many barriers in common and consider strategies to address them. The relationship you will build with each client has been really important to understand the full picture both in terms of their daily lives and the specific local barriers.**

(Employment Adviser Diary, Trial 2)

### 3.3 How did we know the toolkit worked?

Using the toolkit helped employment advisers to identify and prioritise interventions with clients, by encouraging the employment adviser and client to design interventions which aligned with the assessment results. The assessment also helped the employment adviser and client to record evidence of measurable success. In this way the assessment was used to establish a baseline, which could be compared with the results of a re-assessment of the client following intervention. Observing improvement, whether in mobility, computer use, job search skills or other areas, is extremely motivating for the client and their employment adviser.

The success of the employment assessment toolkit is evidenced by the confidence that employment advisers expressed regarding the segmentation levels generated for clients. This evidence was backed up by direct quotes from employment advisors and clients about the relevance of the assessment process.

**I went up to 2a! It's great.**

(Client, Trial 2)

A positive consequence of the employment advisers using a formal assessment approach was a shared language that supported communication between professionals and clients. This advantage went beyond the adviser/client relationship. The consistent use of the assessment approach across the project also provided a shared language amongst the employment advisers, which

supported mutual support and professional development, as well as easier communication with their managers. Overall, a standardised assessment approach, with its associated consistency of language and data, provides improved clarity of purpose and communication within an organisation (and potentially for communication beyond the organisation).

**And it also does highlight [the importance of] this approach to supporting people with sight loss. [It] takes them so much further forward towards the job market than any of the work readiness contracts.**

[Employment Adviser manager, Trial 2]

### 3.4 How is the toolkit changing our practice?

The new employment assessment toolkit is helping the RNIB group of charities to re-model the way it delivers pre-employment support with blind and partially sighted people. Designed to assess the particular issues faced by blind and partially sighted people, it serves as a diagnostic tool and is useful for planning the steps required to progress towards work. The RNIB group of charities is embedding the employment assessment toolkit as part of our support to working age people. Our use of this standardised assessment model means that in the future our pre-employment support for blind and partially sighted people will be even more closely aligned to the specific needs of those we support.



## 4. Support and intervention

### 4.1 Evidence from the case studies of successful interventions

Twelve of the 14 participants achieved positive changes in their personal circumstances, and some of these changes were dramatic.

- Three ENABLER participants are now in paid employment. This included two individuals who attended the new pre-employment programme, also trialled during this research. The third person secured paid work after 21 years out of work as a result of volunteering as part of the project.
- Three participants have secured full-time education courses; in Sports Injury and IT, a degree in Criminology and a certificate in Human Resource Management.
- Seven participants benefitted from voluntary work as the first important step on their journey into paid employment. One of these individuals, in her 40s, had never worked before.



- Most individuals developed skills in a range of areas: for example travelling independently through mobility training; computer skills through IT training; and accessing information through literacy and numeracy courses.
- One person obtained 10 hours independent living support and training from the local authority, which has helped him move from a situation of complete isolation to one where he is about to start voluntary work.
- Confidence levels and motivation increased for almost all participants over the eight months of the trial.

#### 4.1.1 Interventions linked to sight loss

A variety of interventions tested in this phase of the project proved successful. Evidence gathered demonstrated the positive impact of interventions linked to sight-loss specific skills. In particular:

- computer skills, including assistive technology
- independent travel
- disclosure and communication about disability
- a pre-employment programme designed specifically for blind and partially sighted people.

These were delivered either as targeted interventions, or as part of a standard pre-employment programme specially designed for blind and partially sighted people. This programme was highly regarded by both clients and employment advisers.

#### 4.1.2 Interventions not linked to sight loss

Evidence was gathered from interventions which were not disability specific, for example:

- job search skills
- training/college programmes
- work experience through voluntary work.

Voluntary work seemed to offer particular benefits. As well as the benefits of the work itself, it was often linked to meaningful practice and the development of other skills such as mobility, IT, and confidently discussing their sight loss with work colleagues. The efforts and specialist knowledge of the employment advisers were important in finding these voluntary placements, and in the preparatory work to make them successful.

**Time to really spend time with [my client] as her mentor, for instance when she will be coming in to volunteer here [at an Action office]. Without this project, I simply wouldn't have time to mentor her in this way to help develop her confidence with a view to moving her closer to employment.**

(Employment Adviser diary, Trial 2)

## 4.2 Re-thinking how to measure success

Developing skills in these areas does not guarantee employment, but they are important indicators of proximity to the labour market and arguably prerequisites for securing paid jobs. However, clients who developed new skills in these areas also reported greater security and wellbeing, and improved independence. These were important outcomes because clients increased their contribution and participation through unpaid work.

Within this research a number of clients benefitted from their employment advisers referring on to services that went beyond a strict employment remit. Blind and partially sighted people furthest from the labour market often face multiple barriers to employment. Employment advisers sometimes need to ensure clients have access to wider support services, as this may lead to individuals being better placed to seek employment in the future. Using their specialist knowledge and expertise, employment advisers secured independent living training, self-care support and appropriate state benefits as just a few examples of this wider support.

**The project is giving time to explore with the clients the barriers they individually face; it allows a much more person centred approach. Many clients face a range of barriers – not just that they are unemployed, many are barriers linked to their social circumstances, and are embedded barriers which can't be overcome in the short term.**

(Employment Adviser diary, Trial 2)

**The last few months have definitely given us an opportunity to try many different approaches with more intensive support than we are usually able to offer.**

(Employment Adviser diary, Trial 2)



## 5. Closing remarks

Too often, provision of employment support fails to meet the needs of blind and partially sighted job seekers. Through this research RNIB has worked closely with blind and partially sighted people and employment advisors to design and test a new employment assessment toolkit alongside innovative support strategies. We believe that implementing the findings from this research will improve the employment prospects of blind and partially sighted people. Therefore, we are embedding the employment assessment toolkit across our own UK-wide employment service and will focus on supporting those who need our help the most – people furthest from the labour market.

The majority of blind and partially sighted people seeking work are not seen by the RNIB group of charities. So we are taking the bold step of sharing the new assessment toolkit and what we have learnt about supporting people furthest from the labour market with other providers. We believe that this will raise the level of understanding of the challenges facing blind and partially sighted people and therefore the quality of provision for them. Our vision is a welfare to work industry in which all providers have the ability to support blind and partially sighted people seeking employment.

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## 7. Where to find more information

Read the three ENABLER project research reports

Visit: [www.rnib.org.uk/enablerresearch](http://www.rnib.org.uk/enablerresearch)

Download the employment assessment toolkit

Visit: [www.rnib.org.uk/assessmenttoolkit](http://www.rnib.org.uk/assessmenttoolkit)

Find out more about RNIB's research in employment and other areas

Visit: [www.rnib.org.uk/research](http://www.rnib.org.uk/research)

Contact: [research@rnib.org.uk](mailto:research@rnib.org.uk)

Find out more about RNIB and Action services for employers and employment professionals

Visit: [www.rnib.org.uk/employmentservices](http://www.rnib.org.uk/employmentservices)  
[www.actionforblindpeople.org.uk](http://www.actionforblindpeople.org.uk)

Contact: [employmentservices@rnib.org.uk](mailto:employmentservices@rnib.org.uk)

Find out more about the Visual Impairment Centre for Teaching and Research.

Visit: [www.birmingham.ac.uk/victar](http://www.birmingham.ac.uk/victar)

Download RNIB's pre-employment programme trainer's manual

Visit: [www.rnib.org.uk/preemployment](http://www.rnib.org.uk/preemployment)



# About RNIB and Action for Blind People

RNIB works with Action for Blind People to draw on a wide range of skills and resources to support blind and partially sighted people. Our close relationship enables us to provide a unique combination of complementary strengths and expertise to support an ever increasing number of blind and partially sighted people.

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