

Wales Council of the Blind Roundup

Summer 2014



A group of disabled people use forum theatre to troubleshoot attitudinal barriers: read more about the 'Sharing Ideas, Planning Together' project inside.

In this issue: Employment

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Wales Council of the Blind News

Sharing Ideas, Planning Together

The Bridgend Coalition of Disabled People has been working hard to put together an inaugural event for their Lottery-funded project, Sharing Ideas, Planning Together. Disabled people from across Bridgend gathered in Cefn Criwbr to thrash out some of the issues facing people in the county – from inaccessible transport to disability hate-, and mate-, crime.

The event combined techniques to ensure everyone's view is given space. Poetry, forum theatre, discussion groups, on-stage interviews and plenary discussion filled a packed agenda.

Personal stories were shared by Rob, Dean, Craig and Mandy on-stage with frankness, humour and courage: stories of exploitation, doors closing on opportunities, the misuse of disabled people's facilities - Mandy's final poem told us that sex should happen in beds, not in disabled toilets!

Sheets were posted around the hall for delegates to write their ideas, wishes, complaints throughout the day. These were gathered up and will contribute to the shaping of future events.

The three-year programme of events is being co-produced with BCDP, WCB, Disability Wales, and disabled people in the county. Coffee mornings, training sessions and discussion groups will be taking place throughout the project and, hopefully, beyond.

The aim of the project is to increase the skills and knowledge of disabled people necessary to work within political and administrative structures so that their views and experiences can inform policies and service planning. It also aims to strengthen service providers' awareness of the challenges disabled people

face daily and of the barriers put in place that constrain their active citizenship.

WCB is a partner in this project and is particularly keen to encourage people with sight loss to have their voices heard in future events. If you live in Bridgend County and would like to come along, the next event is in August. Please contact Cathy via telephone 07814 209 472 or bridgendcoalitionDP@gmail.com.

Owen Williams, Director, introduces a change of name and our future work.

In the previous edition of Roundup we reported that the legal relationship between Vision in Wales and Sight Cymru had ended. At our AGM on 31st March our members voted unanimously to revert back to our previous name albeit with one important and symbolic difference. People with sight loss form the majority of our board of trustees and this will be a criterion moving forward. Therefore, the motion was passed that we change our name to Wales Council of the Blind instead of Wales Council *for* the Blind (WCB) and we are in the process of doing so. We believe that the change of name best reflects our role of representing the voice of people with sight loss across Wales.

With the ending of the financial year the board of trustees are delighted to report a much healthier financial position and we will report a surplus on the 2013-14 accounts in the region of £20,000. The transformation of the organisations' finances is largely due to the efforts of staff and a number of cost cutting exercises undertaken by both staff and trustees. With the significant improvement in the level of our reserves, WCB now has a sound platform for recovery and growth.

Rebecca Phillips, External Engagement Officer, explains her role at WCB.

For many years, I have managed the office administration at WCB. However, following a staffing re-structure, my role has now changed to that of the 'External Engagement Officer'.

I am now responsible for working with, and offering support to local VI societies across Wales in order to share information and address local and national issues experienced by blind and partially sighted people.

As the umbrella agency we want our members and people with sight loss to contribute to setting priorities and work streams. We aim to achieve this through the establishment of Regional Steering Groups and by continuing to work with local societies and forge closer links with clubs and individuals to inform our work. I am looking for regional representatives to sit on the board of WCB and I would love to hearing from anyone who is interested in fulfilling this role. There will be between 4 and 6 meetings a year including an AGM and all reasonable expenses would be paid.

Also, I would welcome the opportunity to come along to your meetings to talk to your members about the work of WCB and, importantly, to listen to your concerns and triumphs so that these can be shared across Wales.

This is a new and exciting opportunity for me and I am looking forward to meeting up with old friends and colleagues, but I am especially excited about meeting people for the first time and building strong relationships.

Advertisement feature

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- Keep you as informed as possible in the event of an unplanned power cut.

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Employment and vision impaired people

In this edition we focus on employment. We start by looking at a couple of personal stories, then consider the Access to Work process, and raise some concerns about how it is working for VI people. We then have articles from organisations which can help VI people get into work.

Gary's Story

WCB's Richard Bowers visited Vision Support to talk to Gary Peacock, Joy Smith and Rebecca Szekely.

Gary Peacock is working at Vision Support under the supervision of Joy Smith and with support from Rebecca Szekely at RNIB. This job is a short-term contract of sixteen weeks and, as such, has proved to be challenging in one key area – Access to Work. But what was Gary's background before working at Vision Support?

'I came through the usual 'blind from birth' territory. I attended St. Vincents and became a telephonist/receptionist but due to redundancies I lost my job at Barclays Bank, for which I worked for ten years. I had a career change and did an access course, then an English degree, then a PGCE and taught for four years. I wanted to carry on teaching but I had to supplement that income with a part-time job working as a telephonist in a call centre.'

Teaching is a profession that requires constant use of - and referral to - printed materials, and in English Literature this is a particular requirement. Gary had to find his own way around the problem of sharing the same editions of texts with students. It was not really practical to refer students to page numbers in a novel when he was accessing it through a different medium, such

as Braille. Then he hit upon an online repository for the world's literature.

'Someone turned me onto Project Gutenberg so I was able to produce the texts so that we were all singing from the same hymn-sheet. I was able to extract the bits of the text I wanted them to study.'

Gary accessed e-texts with the use of JAWS screen reader. 'I started out using Braille when I first began teaching but found that I needed to search the text, which I found difficult in Braille. I was dealing with 16 to 18-year-olds and you have to keep on top of them – you need eyes in the back of your head to cope with them and when the ones in the front didn't work...! It was great in that once I was confident, out came the laptop and I'd be listening through both ears to the class and through an earpiece to JAWS.'

In his latest job, access technology is still a requirement. JAWS enables Gary to read the spreadsheets, emails and Word documents necessary to carry out his tasks.

'I've been brought in to assist Amanda, the events coordinator, to organise an event (under the banner of the Cheshire Vision Impairment Consortium) at Hulme Hall – entitled “A Grand Day Out”. This is a chance for service users to come along and visit stalls from various suppliers. I've been brought in to assist in the planning, organising, contacting and follow-up – making sure the booking forms are in and so on. I'm using a laptop running JAWS version 13. I'm using Excel as well, and Word. I'm also using Outlook for email.'

Anyone who has needed to work with access software such as screen readers knows that there is a learning curve to climb. It is no surprise, therefore, that once a particular programme is mastered you tend to stick with it. Gary had mastered JAWS, favouring its ability to cope with demanding work environments, and continues to use it at Vision Support. 'I like to think that I'm

competent with Jaws. I wasn't familiar with Zoomtext and Supernova and, because a lot of what I've done has involved corporate and finance sectors, JAWS has been the key screen-reader for me.'

One of the drawbacks of high-end access software is the need to upgrade to meet the changing demands of the software that it helps the user to access. This is particularly important in the workplace, where the individual has no control over the systems being used. Gary needed to upgrade from version 13 to 14. Was Access to Work able to support this upgrade?

'Yes, they did eventually. But it was a painfully slow process. When Rebecca contacted me two weeks before the job started to tell me we're all ready to go, I got in touch with Access to Work and started the ball rolling. It took them ten days to get back in touch. So I had to reinitialise contact with them and they told me that my details had been lost in the system, and I had to keep on pursuing them once I'd already started working.'

Delays like this can be challenging when you're keen to get your teeth into the job. Joy Smith, Deputy CEO at Vision Support, explained some of the disabling barriers that were put in Gary's way.

'We've had awful problems with Access to Work. We've found it so difficult that I've had quite a heated conversation with them. For Gary it's been quite challenging because he's only here for sixteen weeks. The equipment is supposed to be here this week and it's not. Gary is very resourceful but essentially, if he'd gone to work in a place that had no understanding of sight loss, he'd have been stymied for four to five weeks and that's unacceptable.'

Gary reiterates this view. 'I count myself extremely lucky that a) this is a smaller office environment and b) it's vision-centred. And I'm thinking if this was not a vision-aware environment and one that I'd never been to before, how many other difficulties would

this present – not only to me, but to other blind people who may not have the experience that I've got?'

There has been a change in the way Access to Work operates in recent years. A move from specialist to generic assessors has resulted, many feel, in a service that doesn't understand the client's needs, based upon an intimate knowledge of specific impairments.

'The problem with them is that previously they had a person working in the area who had an awful lot of experience about sight loss. That's no longer the case and so everything is taking such a long time. Previously we would have just made a phone call and it all would have been done very swiftly. In my opinion, it seems as if they're procrastinating to save money. And Gary didn't receive his information in accessible form either, which is very poor.'

Despite Gary's understanding of his own access requirements, no action could be taken until an assessor was sent out. 'Essentially, Gary knew what he needed. Yet we had to wait ten days for someone to come and tell him what he already knew.'

This situation is all the more alarming when considering that we live in times where co-production and user-control and choice are being proposed as models for service planning and delivery. Here a disabled person's thorough understanding of their access requirements is being tacitly challenged – and in a way that is surely a waste of resources and money.

'It's a joke and it's very frustrating', Joy insists. 'It's certainly very frustrating from our perspective because we know how difficult it is for people to find employment – and Gary's job is only temporary so he's nearly finished. Access to Work needs to improve. It's a case of raising the standards. Their outcomes need to be a lot stronger such as “we agree to see someone within two days of them being employed”'.

The payment system also needs improving and this is where suppliers should step in. 'Even when we'd got Access to Work to agree the purchase we then had to sort out the payment to the supplier. We had to pay another £22 to order by credit card because that was the quickest way to get it. That may not seem like a huge amount but that could pay someone for two hours' work. But we took the decision that we could not wait another ten days for Gary's equipment. Unfortunately, even though we paid for the quicker delivery, it still didn't arrive on time.'

Rebecca Szekely talks about her work with Gary and others in her role at RNIB.

'I started with RNIB initially as a Transitions Officer (prior to that I was a careers advisor) working with 14 to 25-year-olds - supporting young people through their transitions from school to college, university, employment. I'm working in all of North Wales and down to mid-Powys. Back in December, my hours were increased to see if there is a demand for employment services for adults. Prior to that I used to refer people to my colleagues in South Wales but I asked if we could explore doing something up here for adults. Gary is one of the adults I support.'

What were the differences when you moved from generic support to supporting people with sight loss? A generic careers advisor must be a different experience to working specifically with people with sight loss, so how did you make the change? 'I went through the comprehensive induction training with RNIB and read the literature on accessible information, clear print guidelines and so on. However, as a careers advisor in a school in Wales I knew what needed to be done – I knew that if someone had a statement their support would be transferred if they were to go to college, for example.'

People with sensory loss face some of the greatest barriers to employment. Where do these barriers come from? 'The prejudice of

the employer is a huge barrier. Also a client I went to see did not want to get support from Access to Work but when I told him about the technology available to help him in an admin role, he didn't want to access this either – so the barrier for him was the technology barrier. And then there are the general ones: access to public transport, people's confidence in going out and so on. Some of my clients have not worked for twenty years so it's quite scary – for *anybody* who's been unemployed for some time - to make that change into employment. For the younger ones, parents can be a barrier: they say 'what can blind people do?' I ask 'Well, what skills does he have?' It's about changing the question because parents can be a bit overprotective – a bit negative, perhaps.'

What can a young person who has these sorts of barrier do to change things? What can offer a way forward in terms of building confidence and skills? 'I have four young people on the Future In-sight project and I could refer double - triple - that onto the scheme. We have two young people doing work in Vision Support's office in Wrexham and from that they will continue as volunteers ... and from that they've started a young person's group. They've gone bowling, they've got UCAN* coming in a couple of weeks, they're going to do tennis and start an allotment. All this because we referred two people onto the Future In-sight project. And it's a really good example of how it works to build confidence.'

Do you facilitate school work placements through this project?

'Future In-sight can offer support. I think that's why the project was originally set up so it could help with equipment and so on. We haven't needed this in North Wales - our placements have been with unemployed young people, not school-children. For example, one of my clients had woken up one day to find her sight had gone. She was just devastated and it took her a long while to get to where she was and she felt 'I'm never going to be able to find work', so we put her onto the project and her confidence has gone sky high.'

What kind of support do you offer? 'I can work with people to improve their CVs or, if people don't have one, I can help them to write one. The classic mistake is when people do CVs and they don't target them to the job they're applying for. Doing a CV is a very fluid process, so I keep it on the computer so that we can talk about how we target it to the job.'

One disabling barrier is inaccessible information and documents. How accessible is the application process? 'Well, it can be a nightmare. It depends on the individual company's application form and it depends on the individual applicant and what software they have and so on. Sometimes when someone has written a personal statement I'll copy-and-paste it into the application – things like that can help somebody. It depends on the individual, really. The problem is many people don't have access to computers and also internet access in North Wales can be slow.'

'You can sit with a client and fill at an application form relatively easily if you've spent some time getting background information. In conversation you can bring out the skills and qualities a person might have. Some people aren't ready to discuss things straight off but by the second or third interview I can bring it in as part of the discussion. Often, people don't know the skills that they've got...'

Is that where your prior experience as a careers advisor comes in?

'Yes. It's a bit like going back to basics – this is Access to Work, this is what it does; tell me what jobs you would like to do; what are your skills? But what I do is not just about employment; I provide a holistic service by offering a signposting service. If someone needs Welfare Rights advice I'll refer them on; if somebody needs counselling I'll fill in a counselling application form; if somebody needs rehabilitation I'll refer on to Social Services. And it depends on where that person is found: if they'd been referred to me by an ECLLO then a lot of that signposting would have been done; if they're referred by the Jobcentre they

may not have seen anyone about their sight loss for donkeys' years.'

Contact rebecca.szelaky@rnib.org.uk

* UCAN is a performance and creative arts co-operative for vision impaired children and young people.

Daniel's Story

Cardiff-based Daniel Williams, aged 22, has used his personal experience of living with a vision impairment to start his own business. 'Visualise Training and Consultancy' will provide training and consultancy services to businesses across the UK.

Daniel was diagnosed with Retinitis Pigmentosa at the age of eight. During his school years he experienced bullying and had difficulty coping with his situation. However, he began to accept his condition after attending the Royal National College for the Blind in Hereford where he met lots of inspirational people who taught him to focus on what he could do rather than what he couldn't. After college Daniel progressed onto University where he undertook studies to learn more about supporting those with a vision impairment to become more independent. Since leaving University Daniel has worked but has not sustained employment. He has experienced some negativity from former employers who sometimes thought he was less capable due to his vision impairment.

These experiences motivated Daniel to set up Visualise Training and Consultancy which aims to improve an organisation's awareness, knowledge and confidence when dealing with people with vision impairment. It delivers accredited training, premises accessibility checks and a mystery shopper service provided by vision impaired shoppers. With the support of STAR Communities First and Want 2 Work Daniel has secured start-up funding from

Jobs Growth Wales and UnLtd and has also received financial help to fund additional training for his own professional development. Daniel said, “STAR Communities First and Want 2 Work have been a great support in helping me to develop my idea and turn it into a business.”

If you would like any further information about Daniel’s new business then visit the website, www.visualisetrainingandconsultancy.co.uk, send an email to info@visualisetrainingandconsultancy.co.uk or check the Twitter feed [@visualisetc](https://twitter.com/visualisetc).

Access to Work Scheme – The Process

An Access to Work (AtW) grant helps pay for practical support if you have a disability, health or mental health condition so you can start working, stay in work and start your own business. How much you get depends on your circumstances. The money doesn’t have to be paid back and will not affect your other benefits.

There is no set amount for an AtW grant. How much you get depends on your circumstances. It can pay for things like:

- adaptations to the equipment you use
- special equipment
- fares to work if you can’t use public transport
- a support worker or job coach to help you at work
- disability awareness training for your colleagues

You can also use the award to help start your own business in addition to support from the New Enterprise Allowance.

AtW grants are only available if the employer is based in England, Scotland or Wales. You must be 16 or over and either about to start a job or work trial or in a paid job or self-employed (you can’t get a grant for voluntary work). You might also qualify if

you're getting New Enterprise Allowance or starting work experience under a Youth Contract.

Your disability or health condition must affect your ability to do a job or mean you have to pay work-related costs such as special computer equipment or travel costs because you can't use public transport. However, you might not qualify if you receive certain benefits, for example: Incapacity Benefit, Employment and Support Allowance and Severe Disablement Allowance.

You can transfer your grant to another employer if you change jobs.

For more information or to make a claim, contact Access to Work on 0845 268 8489.

3SC and the Access to Work Scheme

Kathryn Jellings, Head of 3SC Cymru, describes their work in Wales.

The Access to Work scheme is described above. Each year, over 35,000 people make use of this service and there is a one stop telephone number for those who wish to apply. Approximately 30% of all applicants have sensory impairments although only about 10% register currently with vision impairment.

In approximately 60% of all cases the Jobcentre adviser will call for a specialist assessment. 3SC conducts all assessments in Wales through a panel of qualified delivery organisations – these include RNIB and the Royal National College for the Blind in Hereford. The key performance criterion for this contract is to have the completed assessment report returned to the adviser within 10 days, and it is pleasing to report that this benchmark is met in 95% of all cases.

Jobs Growth Wales is a Welsh Government programme that encourages sustainable employment for young people by covering

salary costs at national minimum wage and National Insurance contributions for the first six months of newly created jobs. 3SC Cymru currently has over 600 organisations registered, from the third sector as well as from public and private organisations. We are in the unique position of being able to work with all organisations in Wales to nurture and develop young people to help them succeed. Of course, the benefits to the employer are immense, both from the sense of satisfaction received as well as the practical ability to develop and grow the organisation. We have some inspiring case studies on our website, www.3sc.org/jgw. Email: Kathryn.jellings@3sc.org

Concerns raised around Access to Work

Owen Williams, Director, Wales Council of the Blind

There is overwhelming support for the Access to Work programme in Wales and the support it provides from disabled people, employers and third sector organisations. However, changes to the Access to Work programme have raised concerns from people with sight loss.

The concerns related to lack of empathy and understanding of their sight loss, a reluctance to offer technical assessments and delays in receiving support. These concerns were discussed at the Next Steps Forum (a sight loss sector discussion and planning group) and echoed by a number of sight loss organisations who provided additional case studies.

In the spring I spoke of the concerns raised by people with sight loss at a Cross Party Group on Disability meeting. Employment is a theme that covers the spectrum of disability and a meeting was sought with Access to Work officials to inform them of our concerns and seek clarification around the changes to the scheme.

At the meeting held in May officials from Access to Work updated the group on the key objectives of Access to Work.

“The delivery of Access to Work is about providing disabled people with personalised support quickly and efficiently.

“Access to Work is a key provision to support disabled people with moving into and remaining in work.”

Access to Work provision continues to grow with 291 people, across Wales, with sight loss supported during the period of April to December 2013. 4,772 people with sight loss were supported across the UK during this time. Since 2011-12 the programme has seen an increase in new customers and for the period of April to December 2013 a total of 1,768 disabled people were supported across Wales.

Modernising the service

Access to Work is going through a period of change and is in the process of modernising. They have introduced all recommendations from ‘Getting in, staying in and getting on’ [Sayce 2011] and the scheme is helping more people coming from benefits and aims to provide a flexible, transparent and personalised service to customers.

The programme is re-shaping with over 70 locations across the UK closing, leaving 3 centres where staff will work alongside each other and not in isolation. AtW are currently aware of delays in receiving an initial telephone interview but are working to reduce this considerably.

Empathy and understanding

“Advisors have sheer lack of empathy and understanding“

We, in Wales, benefited previously from an excellent level of on-to-one support from Access to Work advisors where a client was assigned an advisor who would oversee their support needs throughout their employment. This person-centred experience meant that advisors understood fully the needs of the person being supported. We will lose experienced advisors across Wales but we have been informed that they will be replaced and all new advisors will be given disability awareness training internally. With so many concerns raised around empathy and understanding WCB would like to see all staff offered awareness training specifically in vision impairment.

“I would like an opportunity to explain my own circumstances, in my own words, via email or face-to-face”.

Many people have said that they would like one advisor assigned to them. However, AtW informed us that this is unlikely to be the case and no longer will visits be undertaken. We discussed the option of having an opportunity to explain individual circumstances beforehand and we have already seen evidence that this has begun to happen.

Assessments

“I felt discouraged from having an assessment”

We have been informed that approximately 2/3 of enquiries are being dealt with by advisors or with no need for an assessment identified.

“I was asked if I knew what I needed and to get three quotes”

AtW discussed ‘want versus need’. WCB believes that an assessment (when required) should be offered as a matter of right and we would like to see AtW adopt a best practice approach

where people with sight loss are offered an assessment, by a qualified assessor of vision impairment, to suggest the most appropriate access technologies. It is not the responsibility of the client to keep up-to-date with access technologies and to determine need, an assessment should be undertaken. However, we recognise that disabled people often have considerable experience around the technologies that support them and in these cases the process should not be delayed by conducting an assessment.

Plans for the future

With people having difficulties completing claim forms and experiencing delays with payment we welcome plans to have an online claim form for fares within work, support worker hours, etc. However, we should be mindful of digital exclusion.

I for one, as someone with sight loss, am a great advocate of the Access to Work programme and we were encouraged greatly from our meeting with Access to Work. They would welcome hearing from anyone who has experienced problems accessing the scheme. With the modernising of the scheme they expect the process to become more streamlined.

We would also like to see more potential employees and employers aware of the Access to Work scheme and we hope that this edition helps to promote the work of this essential programme.

Employment and disabled people

The following information has been provided by the Welsh Government

Employment policy is not a devolved responsibility of the Welsh Government and remains within the remit of the UK

Government through the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) which operates a number of employment schemes that support people into work.

However, the Welsh Government has a number of devolved responsibilities that supports the opportunities available through the DWP, including skills support and careers advice and guidance. Employment is included as a key priority in the Welsh Government's Framework for Action on Independent Living. The Framework recognises that to make a sustainable impact on employment rates for disabled people it is important that disabled children and young people are supported so they have access to the same educational and training opportunities as their peers. Making progress on other priorities in the Framework, like accessibility of public transport and access to buildings, will also help support people to get and keep good jobs. Other barriers to employment identified by disabled people during development of the Framework were the negative attitudes and misperceptions of some employers and workers.

The UK's Disability Confident Campaign, launched in July 2013, targets employers and workforce attitudes to hiring disabled people. It aims to work with employers to remove barriers to employing disabled people, increase understanding and ensure that disabled people have the opportunity to fulfil their potential and realise their aspirations.

All programmes that support unemployed people, both through the DWP and the Welsh Government should be open to all prospective candidates irrespective of their personal circumstances.

DWP Support

There are a number of options available to support disabled people into employment; each Jobcentre should provide access to a specialist Disability Employment Adviser who can discuss

available options, in particular the availability of a special fund for employers, the Access to Work fund, that can be used to make modifications to the workplace for disabled people with disabilities amongst other things. There is also a Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) run employment support programme for disabled people, Work Choice.

Additionally, the DWP Work Programme has been developed to tackle the barriers individuals face in securing and retaining employment, and this includes skills. The Welsh Government-related support for tackling barriers to employment has been designed as a pre-Work Programme intervention, focused on customers prior to their becoming eligible for the Work Programme. Standard mandatory eligibility for unemployed people is at 9 months for those aged 18-24 years, and 12 months for those aged 25 years and over. Early entry to the programme can apply for people facing significant barriers in returning to work.

Further information on the work of the Department of Work and Pensions is available from their website:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/department-for-work-pensions>.

Joint Working

A European funded project is in operation that may provide the specific support needed. Want to Work, a programme to support people into work, is delivered jointly by DWP and the Welsh Government. It is specifically designed to support economically inactive people closer to or back into work and operates on the basis of an individual assessment of a participant's needs. Freephone contact: 0800 328 6370.

Welsh Government Post-16 Training Support

For post-16 learning options such as Work Based Learning (WBL), all WBL Providers delivering Traineeships, Work-Ready (formerly Steps-to-Employment) and Apprenticeship Programmes may claim 'Additional Learning Support' funding to assist them with the costs of securing the support necessary to make their provision accessible to disabled learners and learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. More information about the work undertaken by the Welsh Government to support more people into employment is available through our website:
<http://wales.gov.uk/topics/educationandskills/?lang=en>

New Development

The Welsh Government is currently developing a new service, the Skills Gateway that will provide individuals and businesses with a single access point to a portfolio of employment and skills programmes delivered by both the Welsh Government and key partners such as Jobcentre Plus. A key benefit of the Skills Gateway will be the opportunity to gather real-time intelligence on skills needs and also employment opportunities.

The Skills Gateway will deliver a brokerage or 'clearing' function which effectively matches and steers individuals to the employment opportunities available, including progression opportunities for those in work, as well as access opportunities for those outside the labour market.

Working alongside the Skills Gateway, we are also developing a Skills Priorities Programme which, amongst other activities, will provide Labour Market Intelligence to provide a means of reviewing whether employment and skills provision is meeting employer demand and steering individuals towards available job opportunities.

Business Start-up Service

The Welsh Government have a business start up service which is aimed at anyone who is thinking of starting up a business in Wales or has just started up (within their first 12 months of trading). We offer taster workshops called 'Taking the plunge' which looks at the advantages and disadvantages of self employment and helps people to decide if starting a business is for them. We can then follow up with a series of 1/2 day workshops focussing on the skills needed to run a business. For example, workshops include: How to Research your Market; How to Price your Product; How to Manage your Business Finances. After the workshops, some people can then get further advice and possibly access to finance, including a start up loan.

We can offer additional support to anyone with a barrier such as providing travel, childcare costs or access to specialist equipment or facilities such as translation for example. Our workshop materials can be provided on audio CD or in Braille if required.

Access to the Startup service is via our helpline on 03000 6 03000 or webpage via www.business.wales.gov.uk.

REACT

The Redundancy Action Scheme (ReAct III) helps people affected by redundancy to update their skills, and encourages recruiting employers to employ someone who has recently been made redundant. ReAct aims to address the needs of people who have been made redundant, or are under notice of redundancy, through a series of measures designed to remove barriers to obtaining new employment.

Who is eligible?

Support under the ReAct programme is available for individuals who have become unemployed in the last six months as a result of redundancy or are currently under notice of redundancy.

What is available?

Employers who recruit an eligible individual can receive the following support through ReAct:

- A wage subsidy called Employer Recruitment Support (ERS) of up to £3,000 payable in 4 instalments over a 12 month period.
- Reimbursement of up to 50% of the cost of any training deemed necessary to sustain their employment, up to a maximum of £1,000.

Support is also available to help participants update their skills and return to work. This support amounts to 100% of training costs, up to a maximum of £1,500.

In addition, help is available to remove any barriers to training such as travelling and lodging costs and the cost of special equipment. Up to £200 per person is available for this use.

Find out more

You can get more information from the ReAct Team in Swansea on 01792 765 888, from Learning and Careers Advice on 0800 100 900, or from your local Careers Wales office.

Essential Skills in the Workplace

The Essential Skills in the Workplace programme offers employers the chance to identify and address the impact of low skills amongst their workforce, including literacy, communication, numeracy and ICT.

Who is eligible?

Support is available to employers in the private, public or third sector.

What is available?

Training is available in literacy, numeracy, ICT and English for speakers of other languages from entry level up to and including level 2. The training is available free of charge and can take place at a time and place convenient for the employer and employees alike. The training is delivered across Wales by training providers who are under contract to Welsh Government and the training is tailored to the specific needs of the business and the participating employees.

What are the benefits?

Improving these skills will help employees to do their jobs more effectively by giving them the confidence to progress and improve productivity.

Investing in a workforce's skills can improve productivity, increase accuracy and offer a better quality of service, thereby strengthening customer relations. By creating an atmosphere of initiative and innovation, employers will become more attractive places to work – and this will help to attract and retain the best staff.

Find out more

To find out more about addressing essential skills in your workplace, email: EssentialSkills@wales.gsi.gov.uk

Wales Union Learning Fund (WULF)

The Wales Union Learning Fund (WULF) aims to encourage individuals to return to learning through overcoming barriers to

learning arising from structural, personal, occupational or work-based factors. WULF is delivered through a number of different projects which are administered by a range of different Trade Unions. Each of these projects offers a selection of different training courses ranging from developing your digital skills to learning a new language.

More information is available from Welsh Government. Please contact Jenny Madge on 01792 765 948 or email Jenny.Madge@wales.gsi.gov.uk.

RNIB Cymru Employment Services

RNIB Cymru is able to offer an employment service to blind and partially sighted people throughout Wales. We help individuals of all abilities to find a job or stay within a job and can offer various forms of support to help you. From advice about creating a new CV, help with job searching, or advice about interview techniques, our Employment advisers work on a tailored one to one basis with each individual. We also offer specialist Employment Hub groups for our blind and partially sighted clients across South Wales.

RNIB Cymru has started a new Employment Hub in Newport. The employment hub is based in Clarence House in the Remploy Office. The Employment Hubs are designed for blind and partially sighted people to come and use the accessible computers for job searching as well as writing CVs, filling in application forms and gaining advice on interview techniques. It's also an opportunity to meet others with similar needs and experiences and gain confidence together in learning techniques to disclosing their sight conditions to employers. Being situated within the Remploy office in Newport, it is really beneficial for our clients as they are able to link in with the different employment services that they offer as well.

RNIB Cymru also has two other Employment Hubs throughout South Wales, one in Neath, based in the Neath Port Talbot College building on Queen Street, and one in Cardiff, based at the RNIB Office in Jones Court, Womanby Street.

Anyone who is blind or partially sighted and is looking for employment is able to access one of the Employment Hubs by contacting RNIB Cymru or one of the employment advisers directly.

One of our success stories from our Cardiff Employment Hub is of a client who, having attended the group for 2 years after his eyesight deteriorated, gained employment with the Millennium Stadium as an event bar assistant. He said, "I was feeling quite down before I started work with Millennium Stadium, I enjoy working with a team who understand what support I need when I'm in work and I'm very grateful to the support from RNIB in helping me." He also started working at Cardiff City Stadium on event days and thoroughly enjoys working at both stadiums on a regular basis.

RNIB Cymru has been awarded funding from the Big Lottery, to enable us to deliver the Future In-sight Project. The project is designed to make a difference to the employability skills of 14-25 year olds who are experiencing sight loss. Working with a range of partners, it will reach young people from right across Wales.

The project has tailored a programme of activities to respond to the needs of the young people following discussions with them. These include developing personal confidence, gaining practical skills, experiencing work and planning for the future. Led by our partner, UCAN Productions, confidence building courses are being held across Wales encouraging team working, self-advocacy and use of body language and development of social skills.

A modular 'finding your feet' style course has been written in consultation with young people to address the things they want to know about.

RNIB know how difficult it is for young people to gain worthwhile experiences of work. Future In-sight will provide supported work placements for those doing work experience through school and for those working with RNIB Cymru Employment and Transitions staff.

Not only does the project support the young people, it also supports the employer. For example, free visual awareness training will be provided for the employees when they accept someone on placement. If any specialist technology is needed it will be available on loan so that there is no expense for the employer. Each young person will be assessed to look at their individual needs and then technology support will be available to ensure that the equipment is compatible with that of the employer and to give any training that is required.

Orientation and mobility around the workplace will be provided by Guide Dogs and Vision Support (in North Wales). An example of this is when we had a young lady starting a placement whose vision impairment affected her depth perception and was unable to see anything when it became dark. Guide Dogs worked with her to plan a safe route to the placement and gave orientation around the workplace to help make it a success.

With our partners we aim to make a lasting difference to the prospects of young people in Wales. Danny, one of the young people we have been working with, has not worked for over three years and was looking for some more up-to-date work experience for his CV. He said, "My three week placement with Cadwyn housing association went fantastic. Everyone was so welcoming, and staff were always at hand if I had a problem. Giving the staff visual awareness training definitely helped. The

opportunity has given me more experience and the confidence to apply for a wider range of jobs.”

Helen Williams, Corporate Services Manager at Cadwyn commented, “We are very pleased that Danny has continued his placement, volunteering two days per week. Danny carries out a front line role with little support. RNIB installed software to enable Danny to use our computers. Working with RNIB we were made sure that Danny felt comfortable in our work environment and vision impairment awareness training meant that staff had a better appreciation of what it is like to have vision impairment. Cadwyn works with disabled tenants including those with vision impairments. This training and working with Danny has provided us with more effective ways to support them. We will be offering all our staff the opportunity to attend visual awareness training and continue to raise awareness on our intranet.”

If you would like to know any more information, please contact Helen Gummatt-Preece, Employment Adviser for RNIB Cymru on 07833 441 305 or 02920 828522.

Significantly higher employment outcomes at RNC

Employment outcomes for adult trainees on the Work Ready programme at Hereford's Royal National College for the Blind (RNC) show the range of skills learnt reach beyond the classroom, and highlight that doing what you love can lead you to your chosen career. 40% of adult trainees stepped straight into work in April 2014. 100% of the trainees who undertook the Music & Media Technology course have gone into employment this year. The provision of industry-standard equipment enables a workable understanding of the technologies and techniques required. Teaching practices are individualised depending on each trainee's needs, for example assistive computer technology.

One of these trainees is Jack, 25, who is currently undertaking a Temporary Employment Position (TEP) with Mid Wales Music in Newtown, Powys. Jack was a regular customer prior to the course at RNC and wished to return home upon completion of his training. The role utilises his knowledge within the sound and music industry through provision of advice (particularly on his main topic of interest, guitars) and sales of mixing desks, microphones, amps and even the occasional drum kit.

“I have taken my love of recording and building relationships with the artists and bands into this role and can now add to that the specialist knowledge I gained at RNC,” said Jack. “Learning as a mature student, I felt like a sponge; I absorbed everything. Without the help and support of the Music Technology department I wouldn't have got this job.”

Jack aspires to stay in employment within the industry and to buy equipment so that he can work on his own music projects. It is well documented within the media that unemployment is still a major issue within the UK, most notably for disabled people. Duncan, a trainee on the NVQ Business Administration course,

had found it difficult to gain meaningful employment despite having achieved academically at university and gaining a doctorate. Having passed the NVQ at Level 2, Duncan is now a researcher in Unified English Braille at New College Worcester.

“RNC is proud that five out of the thirteen adult trainees who completed their courses last term have successfully entered employment,” said Principal Sheila Tallon. “Each adult receives help with creating a useful CV and in applying for jobs and we are always keen to keep in touch with those who have left the College, whether that may be one year or ten years ago.”

The Work Ready programme is offered by RNC and funded through the Department for Work & Pensions’ Residential Training Unit, offering help and support to people of working age to gain the skills and independence they need to begin their careers. The College has recently been awarded a further two year contract to deliver the programme by the DWP and some spaces are still available for a September 2014 start. For more information, please contact the Enquiries line on 01432 376 621 or email info@rnc.ac.uk.

Advance2work at Queen Alexandra College

Despite some genuine challenges, many people with little or no sight find employment. The Advance2work team at Queen Alexandra College provides training, support and guidance which deliver real jobs.

Colin is a professional fitness instructor working in a busy gym where his colleague Alex is assistant manager. Ayshia is a key administrator in a hectic fundraising office; Dave is responsible for co-ordinating major building and renovation projects. Paul manages a successful transcription business producing customer information in Braille, large print and audio for financial services customers. They are all registered blind or partially sighted.

One thing they also share in common is that they were mature clients at Queen Alexandra College (QAC) in Birmingham where the Advance2work (A2W) programme, funded by the Department for Work and Pensions, has helped hundreds of people with disabilities to unlock their potential and realise their ambitions for long term employment. A2W clients can be day or residential with accommodation and subsistence costs met by government funding. Only a quarter of people of working age with vision impairment have a job. Amongst disabled people, people with sight loss experience the greatest barriers to employment, and there is no reason why this should be the case. Research has demonstrated conclusively that disabled people are more reliable, harder working and more loyal employees than others. Based in Birmingham, QAC's A2W provides a level of personalisation and individual support that other work initiatives cannot match. As a result the number of sustainable employment outcomes is around 40%, more than ten times better than other government sponsored programmes. Clients are referred by Disability Employment Advisers and funded by DWP. Each client is assessed for both their potential and also to identify the barriers that are preventing them from finding work. Then an individualised programme, lasting up to a year, provides a mix of skills development, vocational training, qualifications and work experience. Employment consultants work on a one-to-one basis to identify opportunities, advise on job searching and applications and coach in interview skills. With many warm links to employers, A2W staff can help to counterbalance the stereotyping and a reluctance to consider employing disabled people which, mainly through lack of first hand experience, still exists within many organisations.

A2W leader, Sherv Garcha said, "We have proved again and again, that our clients are highly employable and bring great benefits to the organisations they join. Once the initial hurdle of getting to know what they have to offer is overcome, it is a win-win outcome for employers and clients. Key to this is very often an

opportunity for clients to undertake a work experience placement and show at first hand their abilities and commitment.”

The A2W team can be reached on 0121 454 8700 for a chat.
www.advance2work.co.uk

Blind in Business

Blind in Business is a registered charity which operates across the United Kingdom. It helps young blind and partially sighted people into work through their Training and Employment Services, and encourages them to identify and achieve their ambitions. If you are able to get a group of people together, Blind in Business is willing to travel to you to offer career advice.

Their training services work with blind and partially sighted people, their parents and families, and teachers to raise their career aspirations. They run training days in schools across the UK, working with over 450 school children annually.

Their employment services work with candidates to give them the chance to achieve their chosen careers. They work with over 200 employers to defuse any anxiety they have in taking on a vision impaired graduate, showing them the ease of adaptation with technology. Blind in Business also give support to those losing their sight who are already in employment.

For more information, ring 020 7588 1885 or visit the website www.blindinbusiness.org.uk.

Employing a guide dog owner

The Guide Dogs organisation has produced a comprehensive guide for employers, which tells them all that they need to know about employing a guide dog owner. It explains that guide dogs are working animals, not pets, and do not disrupt the everyday operation of business or premises. It also outlines the rights which disabled people and guide dogs have under the Equality Act 2010. These include the right to expect employers to make reasonable adjustments, either to the working environment or working practices.

The specific needs of people with guide dogs are described. It is also recommended that staff should be given a briefing before a new employee who is a guide dog owner starts work, so that any concerns can be addressed. The guide also include details of useful contacts, and other relevant information leaflets.

To obtain a copy of 'Employing a Guide Dog Owner: Access requirements' in a range of accessible formats, please contact Guide Dogs on 0118 983 5555 or send an email to guidedogs@guidedogs.org.uk.

We would like to thank everyone who has contributed to this section. We would also welcome any comments from readers.

The views expressed in this newsletter are not necessarily those of WCB, and as much of the material is submitted by third parties, we cannot be held responsible for the accuracy of the information therein. We reserve the right to edit for publication.

The theme for the next edition of Roundup will be '**Third (Voluntary) VI Sector Services across Wales**'. If you wish to make a contribution on this topic, or on any aspect of visual impairment, please contact richard@wcb-ccd.org.uk.

Have Your Say!

Welsh Government Consultations

Details of all WVG consultations can be found on their website, <http://wales.gov.uk/consultations>. The following may be of particular interest to people with vision impairment:

- Legislative proposals for Additional Learning Needs – White paper (closes 25th July)
- Statutory Guidance for Delivery of the Active Travel (Wales) Act 2013 and related consultations (close 4th August)
- Future content and approach to data collection for the Welsh Health Survey (closes 13th August)

Versions of these documents in alternative formats are available by ringing 0300 060 3300 (English) or 0300 060 4400 (Welsh).

DWP Consultation on Personal Independence Payment (PIP)

The UK Government's Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) has commissioned an independent review of how the PIP assessment is working. Evidence is being sought from organisations and individuals who have information that is relevant to how the PIP assessment is operating both for new claims and Disability Living Allowance (DLA) reassessment claims.

For full details of the consultation and information on how to submit evidence, go to www.gov.uk/government/consultations/, choose DWP from the list of departments on the left, then follow the links to PIP assessment. Information in accessible formats can be requested by sending an email to pip.independentreview@dwp.gsi.gov.uk. Responses must be received by 5th September.

Your help needed to direct research into sight enhancement

A team of researchers at Oxford University is developing 'smart glasses' to enhance the vision of people with sight loss. Now the team is conducting a short on-line survey on the needs of VI people so that they can find out which aspects of daily life are most important, and focus their research accordingly in the future. If you have sight problems, please complete the survey which takes around 20 minutes and is compatible with screen reading software. You can find out more and access the survey at <http://www.smart-specs.com/>.

Dr Stephen Hicks from Oxford University gave a very interesting talk about the Smart Glasses project at the Wales and West Conference in June. Copies of presentations from the event will be on the Sight Cymru website www.sightsupport.org.uk when available.

Events

Sight Village Birmingham

Sight Village Birmingham 2014 will take place on 15th and 16th July at the New Bingley Hall, Hockley, Birmingham. The event is a great opportunity to find out more about the latest technology, equipment and support services available to people who are blind or partially sighted.

For more information on this free event, send an email to sv@qac.co.uk go to the website www.qac.ac.uk/exhibitions.htm and follow the link on the left hand side.

Glaucoma Support Group meetings

The International Glaucoma Association (IGA) is organising support group meetings at Abergele Hospital, Abergele on 21st July, 18th August and 15th September. All meetings are held from 1.30 pm to 3.30 pm, and the contact for further information is Linda Lewis on 01745 832295. Details of all support group meetings are on the IGA website, www.glaucoma-association.com – click the ‘support groups’ option towards the top of the screen.

AFBP’s Mobile Information Service

Action for Blind People’s Mobile Information service will be visiting several locations in Wales over the next few months, giving visitors the chance to find out about the latest technology intended to improve the lives of people with vision impairment.

Areas to be visited are:

- 5th – 7th August – Powys
- 29th September – 2nd October – Merthyr Tydfil
- 13th-16th October – Swansea

Full details will be confirmed on AFBP’s website, www.actionforblindpeople.org.uk, closer to the date of the visit.

Summer workshop for VI musicians

The Royal Welsh College of Music and Drama, in association with Musicians in Focus, is running a three-day music workshop in Cardiff from 22nd – 24th July. This course is open to people of all ages with vision impairment who would like to develop their musical skills further. Previous musical experience is not required. Students will gain experience in using music technology (with assistive software), Braille music, performance and improvisation.

The course is free to people with vision impairment but there is a booking fee of £5. For more information, visit the RWCMD

website, www.rwcmd.ac.uk/summerschools or ring Jackie Clifton on 029 2023 1113.

VICTA Family Fun Day

VICTA, the organisation which provides to support to blind and partially sighted young people and their families is organising a Family Fun Day on 22nd August at Folly Farm in Wales. For details of all VICTA events and to book a place, visit the website, www.victa.org.uk/2014-activities, or phone 01908 240831.

Funded sailing opportunities for VI young people

Challenge Wales, a charity which aims to help young people aged 12 to 25 develop social and personal skills through sail training, has received funding from the Big Lottery Fund to give VI young people from Wales the chance to try sailing for themselves. The charity operates a 72-foot round-the-world yacht, also called Challenge Wales, which is based in Cardiff. It is offering a wide range of events around Wales for VI young people (and a buddy) during the summer.

For each voyage there will be just 5 people with vision impairment with 5 buddies. There is no charge and no previous sailing experience is required. Transport is provided to get people to and from each port and get them to and from home. If 1 or 2 group leaders want to come then these costs are also covered. For more information, telephone 029 2022 0266, send an email to reservations@challengewales.org or visit the website <http://www.challengewales.org/visually-impaired-voyages>.

Swap with me event in Bridgend

Come and join Bridgevis' unique 'Swap with Me' event on Friday 5 September and swap places with bus drivers!

This event will let bus drivers swap places with blind and partially sighted customers. It will enable you to sit behind the wheel of a bus, speak with bus drivers, other First Bus staff and local access groups about the barriers visually impaired passengers face when travelling on the bus. Bus drivers (and other visitors to the event) will have the opportunity to wear sim specs and try to board a bus, get a ticket, find a seat and alight in the correct place thereby understanding the issues faced by visually impaired passengers.

The time is 10:30 - 14:00 at Bethlehem Church Life Centre, Cefn Cribwr, Bridgend, Mid Glamorgan CF32 0AA to include time for lunch and networking. For more info, contact natacha.tagholm@firstgroup.com.

Wales EyeCare Conference 2014

Bookings are now open for the Annual Wales Eyecare Conference 2014. The conference, aimed at eye health professionals, specialist social workers, rehabilitation officers and individuals and organisations with an interest in sensory loss, takes place on Wednesday, 17th September at the Cardiff School of Optometry and Vision Science. The event precedes National Eye Health Week 2014, which takes place from 22nd to 28th September.

The Wales Eyecare Conference conference is FREE and includes a buffet lunch. For more information and to book a place, visit WCB's website, www.wcb-ccd.org.uk and click on the 'Eyecare conference' tab at the top of the screen.

News and Information

Welsh Government to invest £1 million in eye care technology projects

The Welsh Government has announced an investment of £9.5 million in new technology and telehealth to improve patient care, and £1 million of this will go towards eye care projects. The NHS Wales Informatics Service (NWIS) in partnership with the Wales Eye Health Care Steering Group will use the funding for two projects - the Open Eyes initiative (which supports electronic referrals to and from secondary healthcare settings) and the technology refresh for optometry practices and connectivity to NHS Wales Network.

Together these projects will enable sharing knowledge about patients to manage them in the community rather than secondary care wherever possible and integrate service delivery when hospital care is essential. Key outcomes for the projects include:

- A reduction in the number of unnecessary hospital consultations;
- A standardised and secure platform for optometry practices throughout Wales;
- Availability of patient information at the point of care;
- Increased numbers of patients retained in primary care receiving treatment closer to home;
- Reduced waiting times for patients at greatest risk.

Guide Dog of the Year Awards 2014

Guide Dogs' Annual Awards are a chance to celebrate the achievements of guide dogs and their owners – and raise money to help the charity's work. Nominations are now open and close on 18th July, and awards will be presented at a ceremony on 10th December. Details of how to make a nomination are on Guide

Dogs' website, www.guidedogs.org.uk, or send an email to jackie.potter@guidedogs.org.uk to get the form in alternative formats.

Calibre Audio Library

Do you want an easy way of listening to your audio books without the fuss of paying an annual subscription? For a one-off payment of £35 (£20 for under-16s) you can enjoy free books for life from Calibre Audio Library's 7,000 digital titles available on USB sticks, CDs or by streaming. Streaming is where you listen to books via the Calibre website on a laptop, smartphone or tablet.

If you are looking for a membership package which includes all your books and a USB player there is a choice of either the Boombox (£65) or Sovereign (£70). Players can also be purchased individually. Boomboxes are £30 and Sovereigns are £35 which includes postage and packing. You can make your own reading list or Calibre can send you a selection of books from your chosen categories. You can borrow up to 3 USB sticks or 8 CDs at a time. If you haven't used audio books before you can take advantage of the 12 week free trial period.

For more information about joining Calibre including our group and book club memberships call the friendly Membership Services team on 01296 432 339 or email enquiries@calibre.org.uk.

The North Wales Alliance and Community Engagement

The North Wales Alliance is a working alliance to enhance, promote, influence and develop services and working practices to meet the expressed needs of people who are blind or partially sighted across North Wales. The Alliance includes Vision Support, RNIB Cymru, North Wales Society for the Blind and the Cardiff Institute for the Blind.

Janette Williams has been seconded from Vision Support to the Alliance as the Community Engagement Co-ordinator for Wrexham, Flintshire, Denbighshire and Conwy. Marian Radcliffe has been seconded from the North Wales Society for the Blind as the Community Engagement Co-ordinator for Conwy, Ynys Mon and Gwynedd. As a first step, Janette and Marian carried out a short survey with service users during the 'Finding Your Feet' launch at Venue Cymru on the 20th March and thanks go to the 34 people who took part. Congratulations also to Ivor Roberts from Denbigh who won the first prize in the draw. Information from the survey has been collated and will be used as the basis for a more detailed questionnaire to find out the views and experiences of blind and partially sighted people in North Wales.

Over the next two years Janette and Marian will be setting up County Steering groups in the six local authority areas. It is thought that there will be two Steering Groups in each County to cut down travelling distance and time for members. As a first step, they will be mapping out all the clubs for blind and partially sighted people which currently exist and finding out whether there are areas where there is little to offer and where activities could be developed. The next phase will be to contact each group and ask for volunteers to be representatives on the County Steering Groups. Representatives would be responsible for consulting their group and feeding any issues or comments to the Steering Group. They would also be responsible for feeding information from the Steering Group back to the group they represent. We are keen to hear both positive and negative experiences and to work in partnership with organisations, recognising good practice and helping to improve services for blind and partially sighted people in both the public and private sector.

We need your help in identifying clubs and groups in North Wales so that we can capture the views of as many people as possible. Jaqui Jones is leading on the project which is putting together this

information and you can email her information on jjones@visionsupport.org.uk or telephone on 01745 338914. Also, if you live somewhere you think would benefit from having a group or social club please let Jackie know. This is a very exciting initiative and with your help we can improve the lives of people who are blind and partially sighted across North Wales.

Janette Williams – Community Engagement Coordinator
Telephone: 07730 413996
Email: janette.Williams@visionsupport.org.uk

Marian Radcliffe – Community Engagement Coordinator
Telephone: 01248 353 604
Email: mar-rad05@hotmail.co.uk

A Helping Paw – RNIB in Swansea

Kiel J. Gibson, Communication and Administration Assistant at RNIB's Swansea office, describes a group for guide dogs and their owners.

Over the past four months RNIB have established a small but thriving group in Swansea city centre. The group focuses on providing a 2 hour session where guide dogs and their owners can come and enjoy meeting others. It gives a chance for the dogs to enjoy running around whilst the owners mingle and learn from each other's experiences.

The Guide Dog Group takes place once every month in the Greenhill Community Centre not far from Swansea train station. The hall allows the dogs to not only bond with one another in a safe environment, but also to work on their obedience, agility and general skills training. Aspects of this include avoiding obstacles, responding to various commands and being able to find certain objects like an owner's seat. However, the group is not just for the dogs themselves but also for the owners to meet and get to

know new people. It doesn't matter how long you've had a guide dog, everyone is welcome to come and be a part of it.

In order to get a better idea of what the aims of this group are, I asked Judith Lombardo one of the Group Leaders about any future goals. She said, "Well, really the aim of the group is to build a better relationship between a person and their dog, but it also gives the dogs and the owners time to mix in with each other. Training is obviously vital so we try to keep a nice balance of activities as well."

The purpose of this group may be simple but it is most certainly an important one. Julie Rees has been a regular for some time and explained the benefits of attending the Guide Dog Group. "It's given me and my dog, Gwen, a great amount of confidence. It just allows you to have a drink and share information, compare notes on your experiences etc." Gwen had been attacked in November 2013 and it had made her extremely uncomfortable around other dogs, especially whilst wearing a harness, but Julie has said that since coming to the RNIB group Gwen has started to build a bond between other dogs and seems far more relaxed.

"She was struggling for a long time but has been making friends with some of the others, so it's definitely been helpful."

So what's next for the Guide Dog Group? Julie went on to explain that some campaigning opportunities will be coming up in the near future. "We would like to get some more equipment for our sessions, so we think it might be good to have a dog show."

If you would like to get involved, call the RNIB Swansea office on 01792 776360.

Eye Health campaign wins award

Congratulations to RNIB Cymru who have won the Public Health Initiative of the Year award.

The “Look After Your Eyes” Community Pharmacy Wales Campaign was delivered in July 2013 and involved all 714 community pharmacies in Wales giving out information about eye health. The month long campaign was supported by all seven health boards in Wales and delivered in partnership with Public Health Wales (PHW), Community Pharmacy Wales (CPW) and RNIB Cymru. It won “Multidisciplinary Innovation Award” at the Chemist and Druggist Awards.

During the campaign pharmacists and pharmacy staff talked to customers about:

- the importance of regular eye examinations and helped signpost them to local optometrists
- how to “look after their eyes” by eating healthily, not smoking and wearing protective sunglasses in strong sunlight.

The results of the campaign were hugely positive with 348 people referred by pharmacists for a NHS sight test and 83 for eye examinations for people more at risk of eye disease. Also 1,933 MURs were completed with people taking medicines for eye conditions such as glaucoma and ocular hypertension.

Useful Publications

Advice for disabled students from Student Finance Wales

Student Finance Wales has produced a booklet giving details of the Disabled Students' Allowance for new and continuing full-time students in higher education in 2014/15. The allowance is intended to help pay the additional costs which you might incur as a result of your disability. You can read the guide online here:

www.studentfinancewales.co.uk/media/8633/sfw_1415_btgb_en_d_a.pdf

It is also available in Braille, large print or audio by emailing with your name, address and customer reference number quoting reference SFW/DSAG/VI4 to: brailleandlargefonts@slc.co.uk or telephone 0141 243 3686. For more information, visit the Student Finance Wales website, www.studentfinancewales.co.uk.

Guide to VI-friendly swimming published

British Blind Sport (BBS) has produced a very comprehensive guide aimed at supporting vision impaired adults and children who want to swim. It will enable coaches, teachers, parents and carers to get a better understanding of the needs of VI swimmers.

The guide explains vision impairment and how it impacts people in a pool environment, gives information on how to make the pool environment accessible and also covers competitive swimming for VI people. It includes case studies and sources of further information and support. You can find out more and download the guide on BBS's website, www.britishblindsport.org.uk, or contact BBS on 01926 424247 or info@britishblindsport.org.uk for a copy in accessible formats.

Focus on RP Fighting Blindness

RP Fighting Blindness was founded in 1975 by people with retinitis pigmentosa (RP). The group was concerned about the lack of knowledge surrounding the disease within the medical profession, the absence of a treatment or cure, and the poor support available for people with RP.

RP affects approximately one in every 3,000 to 4,000 people, making it a significant condition. Originally called The British Retinitis Pigmentosa Society, the charity has since evolved into an

internationally respected medical research charity and a nationwide organisation providing patient support and information with over 5,000 supporters. It remains grounded in its volunteer roots as it seeks to help patients live with RP and to fund cutting-edge research into the causes of and potential treatments for the disease. A team of staff based in Buckingham runs the charity day-to-day. It fundraises, administers the research grant programme and delivers services. This work is supported by many volunteers, without whom the charity could not exist. The charity's main aims are:

- To stimulate and support high quality medical research with the aim of increasing scientific understanding of RP (and related conditions).
- Find treatments or cures for the condition that, when developed, are accessible to anyone affected.
- To signpost or provide good quality, universally-accessible information and support services for people affected.

Patient support and services

A fundamental concern for the organisation is to ensure patients are not only provided with clear and accurate information about RP and treatments, but also to protect them from sometimes dangerous misinformation. Along with many incurable diseases, a huge number of unproven and unregulated treatments for the condition are offered abroad, and the charity receives many queries every year from patients wanting to know more about them. In the recent past these have included treatments using bee stings or acupuncture, which have been advertised online as 'miracle cures'. RP Fighting Blindness is committed to guiding patients to safe and reliable advice about treatments and updates its website and materials when genuine progress is made by researchers, acting as a central resource for verified news.

The charity provides support for people affected by RP at times of emotional stress and practical difficulty; the RP Helpline (0845 123 2354) and the Telephone Befriending services are delivered

by a team of dedicated volunteers, all of whom either have RP themselves or are related to someone with RP. The helpline answers over 1,000 calls and hundreds of emails each year, many from people who would not be able to access this type of support anywhere else. Funds are set aside annually within the organisation's budgets to maintain these services and provide specialist training for those who man the phone lines.

Outreach programmes

The charity is acutely aware that RP is more prevalent in some BME (Black and Minority Ethnic) communities, and important outreach work has begun to address the needs of such groups. Research shows the prevalence of retinal dystrophies in many BME groups is far higher than in white British people, and this is particularly evident in Bangladeshi, Indian and Pakistani communities where prevalence can be ten times as high. A group of volunteers from various cultural and religious backgrounds have agreed to assist the charity in reaching these people. RP Fighting Blindness will also be working to reach such communities through online resources and through Asian media, with the objective of making the Information & Support services as relevant, accessible and sensitive as possible. Such outreach projects are of huge importance to the charity and are an ongoing core activity. Our Outreach Officer, a full time member of staff dedicated to sharing information about RP, the charity and the services we offer, covers the whole of the UK in the course of her work. We are very aware that, being based in England, it is important that Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland are not neglected in terms of outreach and support. In the past our Outreach Officer has attended a number of key events in Wales including the Wales & West Conference, the Minority Ethnic Health Fair, has been involved in a Pakistani focus group run by Sight Cymru and spoken at Eye Clinic Liaison Officer and Sensory Team events. RP Fighting Blindness will also be running an RP Seminar in Cardiff on the 14th of October, a free event for those affected by the condition including patients, their families and

healthcare professionals. You can find out more about this on our website, or by calling our office on 01280 821334.

Medical research

Along with on-the-ground patient support services, a huge amount of work is done to support RP research. In 2012, the vast majority of the organisation's expenditure was on the medical research programme which accounted for over £800,000 worth of funding. At the end of 2012 there were 14 separate projects underway at a number of key research institutions funded by the charity, most notably at the UCL Institute of Ophthalmology / Moorfields Eye Hospital.

Over the next four to five years, RP Fighting Blindness aspires to spend £5 - £10 million on funding research projects. It will continue to fund world-class research to give scientists a better understanding of the disease and progress the transition of this understanding into treatments. It will endeavour to influence other funders to contribute to the costs of RP research, either through lobbying or mutually beneficial partnership funding as appropriate. RPFb sees collaborative fundraising and collaborative research funding as increasingly important over the period.

You can find out more about the work of RP Fighting Blindness, the services it offers and its medical research programmes on its website. Please visit www.rpfightingblindness.org.uk for further information.



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