# Sensory Impairment: Barriers to Accessing Benefits

## Background

There are an estimated 850,0001 people living with hearing loss in Scotland (one in six of the population1), 180,0001 people living with significant sight loss (one in 30 of the population1) and around 5,0001 people who are living with significant hearing and sight loss (deafblind).

Although there is no automatic entitlement to welfare benefits for people living with a sensory impairment, the impact on an individual’s ability to carry out day to day activities (ability to communicate, mobilise independently, carry out activities of daily living unaided etc.) means that many people with hearing or sight loss make successful claims for welfare benefits, including disability benefits such as Personal Independence Payment and Attendance Allowance.

Between June 2020 and July 2021, Visibility Scotland was funded by the Scottish Government to deliver a Benefits Take Up project via their Benefit Take Up Fund2. The aim of the project was to raise awareness of the benefits that have been (and will be) devolved to Scotland and administered by Social Security Scotland. Awareness raising activities were targeted to people living with a sensory impairment, their family members, carers and the professionals who support them.

Over the course of the project, Visibility Scotland delivered **46** awareness raising sessions reaching a total of **378** attendees. During these sessions, feedback was gathered on the barriers experienced by people living with a sensory impairment in regards to accessing benefits. This report summarises the findings from the feedback gathered.

## Barriers to Accessing Benefits

### General Barriers

Many of the barriers identified during the course of the awareness raising sessions were not specific to people living with a sensory impairment and were barriers likely to be experienced by a wide range of different people who may be eligible for benefits.

Common themes included:

* Lack of awareness of the benefits available
* Not knowing where to access information about benefits
* Not knowing where to access support to check eligibility and apply
* Not having access to a computer, printer or the internet
* Perceived stigma around claiming benefits
* Individual’s not feeling “entitled” or “deserving” and feeling they have to “prove” themselves when applying for disability benefits
* Worries around divulging personal information
* Concerns about applying for any new benefits and the impact this may have on existing finances or benefit claims
* Perception that the system is complicated on purpose and “set up to fail people”
* Not knowing which agency to contact for which benefit

**“I think there’s a bit of fear as well, you know, if somebody already has one benefit, they’re fearful of applying for something else in case the first benefit is reduced.”**

**“People feel that the process is overly burdensome on purpose to put them off applying for benefits.”**

**“That’s actually a huge barrier for people, knowing who to go to for what, and when, and feeling passed around.”**

There was also feedback around the names of benefits being confusing in terms of what the benefit is and who it’s aimed at:

**“People don't realise it applies to them just with the title of the benefit. It comes up a lot when I mention Attendance Allowance, people basically think it's Carer’s Allowance. If I try to say to them you could be eligible for Attendance Allowance, they think that means that their wife or partner’s gonna get a benefit.”**

### Communication Barriers

In addition to the general themes outlined above, a number of barriers were raised in relation to specific communication issues experienced by people living with a sensory impairment when attempting to navigate the benefits system and apply for benefits.

Difficulties contacting the Department of Work and Pensions were raised by many session attendees. Issues included the phone system being difficult to navigate and the length of time on-hold. Specific issues around phone contact were raised in regards to Deaf BSL users:

**“Telephone is a real issue for our Deaf service users. Potentially you can be over an hour on-hold waiting to get through and then you’ve got to allow for the fact that you need an extended time because you’re working in two languages.”**

**“The amount of people who ask you, when you’re on the phone for a Deaf person, “can you put them on”, how many times have you got to tell them they have no speech, no hearing, so I can’t put them on the phone.”**

**“The stress and the anxiety that comes with having to wait on a phone call is really high. That might seem like the easiest option for the hearing person at the end of the phone but actually for the Deaf person who’s waiting on that call, even if they’ve got support in place they still know how much hard work that’s going to be because you’re going through a third person.”**

The level of awareness of front line staff in relation to different communication needs was also raised as an issue, particularly with regards to a lack of understanding that for many Deaf individuals, BSL is their first language and they may have difficulties understanding written English:

**“People just assume that everybody who’s profoundly Deaf can read, y’know, and obviously that’s not true.”**

**“Most people who are profoundly Deaf, it’s actually quite difficult for them because they don’t understand written English as we understand it and they can’t read it in the same way we do”.**

Several professionals who provide communication support to people who are heard of hearing or deaf also highlighted issues associated with making calls to the DWP on behalf of the individual’s they support. Feedback highlighted that there is a reluctance from staff answering calls to speak to a third party providing communication support on behalf of an individual without Power of Attorney:

**“When somebody phones up to try and make an application on behalf of someone, if they’ve got barriers for communication, the person at the end of the phone seems to think they’ve lost the power of making decisions. They automatically start saying “Power of Attorney…you’ve got to do Power of Attorney”, no you don’t…this person’s asking me to help them so it should be enough for you to take the application”**

**“When I tried to phone on her behalf, obviously, they want Power of Attorney…they don’t need to have Power of Attorney for somebody to make a phone call for them but because of data protection then they won’t pass that through.”**

### Application Forms

Feedback on the application forms for disability benefits was that they are long, repetitive, difficult to understand and that they are not geared towards people with a visual impairment or whose first language is BSL.

The was also a perception that the questions on the forms are difficult to interpret in terms of the information required from the person applying for the benefit.

**“The sheer length of the form is a huge issue. Also having to interpret what the questions are actually asking about.”**

**“Our client group specifically being visually impaired; they can’t deal with forms y’know so that’s obviously one barrier straight away.”**

**“It causes a lot of worry and stress that you’re not doing it right and then it comes back, it’s not necessarily that their not eligible, it’s just that they weren’t sure what to write or haven’t worded it in the right way.”**

There was a perception that some people living with a sensory impairment find it difficult to express the difficulties they experience and to capture this in a meaningful way on their application form:

**“I think the other barrier is that people, particularly with sight loss, if they’re asked how do you manage, basically they’ll say “I manage fine” because it’s in their home or it’s in their local environment, but if you take someone out of their environment then they have more difficulty in managing and that’s when they’ll need further support, guiding, things like that. And often when the form’s been filled in, the way the question’s been asked, it’s been answered in a way that doesn’t really portray how difficult it is for people with sight loss.”**

**“A lot of people aren’t very good at describing their disability and people are used to all the time describing what they can do and how well they’re managing and suddenly they have to write down on a form why they’re disabled and they’re really really bad at it, you have to really really encourage them to think about their worst day if they didn’t have help”.**

The availability of forms in accessible formats was also raised. Some session attendees fed back that they had experienced difficulties in accessing forms in their preferred format or that their preferred format did not exist:

**“I requested a braille application form for PIP over a year ago and I’m still waiting. I was told by the DWP that I didn’t need braille as I have a husband.”**

**“BSL users understanding written English forms is really difficult. There needs to be forms in BSL for BSL users to follow, because if not, they need someone who is able to explain each question. It has to be an interpreter that does that.”**

### Assessments

The assessment process for Personal Independence Payment was variously described as “degrading”, “intensive”, “intimidating”, “stressful”, “anxiety provoking” and “hostile”.

Issues were raised in terms of the travel required to attend assessments, particularly when meetings are held in locations that require a long journey or travel to an unfamiliar area, and the additional stress and anxiety this can cause:

**“I’ve had people say that when they go to the assessment they often have to travel quite a long way…somewhere they’ve never travelled before so they get anxious…they turn up for the meeting and they’re very very anxious and don’t feel that they can put themselves across well because they’ve been so anxious about having to get to this place that they’ve never been before with a visual impairment”.**

There was also the perception that staff carrying out assessments often don’t have an understanding of visual or hearing impairments:

**“It’s a lack of awareness by the people assessing the individual. Different eye conditions and how it impacts some people…you know, the classic case, somebody might be able to pick up and read N6 but they would get up and be all over the place because they have no peripheral vision, and it’s peoples understanding…”If you can read N6 why are you banging into things?””**

### Accessibility

People living with a sensory impairment often have to rely on someone else (a professional or a family member, carer or friend) to support them with the application process for benefits and to complete the application form on their behalf, due to a lack of accessibility. Whilst many people are happy to access support, for some, not being able to apply for benefits independently has a negative impact on their sense of autonomy.

**“The other thing is the whole visual impairment side of things, that they’re having to rely on someone else. Sometimes they might not want to discuss their situation with strangers”.**

It was also highlighted that having to rely on outside assistance can lead to additional stress, particularly in relation to the time frames for completing applications.

**“If you require assistance to complete the form, y’know sometimes the timeframes in which say an individual from an organisation can assist you is not sufficient to get the application in within the timeframe, and actually that’s quite stressful, if the application’s not in an accessible format but you can’t get assistance within the time frame you need it.”**

## Summary

People living with sensory impairments face varied barriers when accessing benefits as demonstrated by the feedback summarised in this report. Some of these are general barriers that may be experienced by any potential applicant but many are related to communication issues specifically impacting those living with hearing or sight loss.

The feedback gathered over the course of Visibility Scotland’s Benefits Take Up Project highlights that more needs to be done to ensure that people with a sensory impairment are able to independently navigate the benefits system. It is vital that they are able to access information on benefits and application forms in a format that suits them in order to facilitate independence.

**“We’ve talked a lot about the barriers that we face in dealing with social security on behalf of our clients. I think really the issue is that our clients still can’t deal with it themselves…that is the main barrier”.**

For further information or to discuss the findings outlined in this report please contact Natasha Johnston, Project Lead, by email or on 0141 332 4632.

1. Figures taken from “See Hear – A Strategic Framework for Meeting the Needs of People with a Sensory Impairment in Scotland”, The Scottish Government, 2014
2. <https://www.gov.scot/policies/social-security/benefit-take-up/>

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