

This IS working in Northern Ireland

How people with sight loss participate successfully in the world of work

RNIB
Northern
Ireland

supporting blind and
partially sighted people



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Introduction

There are an estimated 46,000 people with significant sight loss in Northern Ireland and this is set to rise to 76,000 by 2036. Every week, another 20 people in Northern Ireland start to lose their sight.

66 per cent of blind and partially sighted people of working age in the UK are unemployed.

In the last three years, RNIB Northern Ireland has helped 302 blind and partially sighted people to either get a job or stay in employment through support from our dedicated team of employment and technology officers.

However, people with sight loss continue to be disadvantaged in employment. Too many are not getting the support they need to get a job and, if they are in employment and develop an eye condition, are not getting the support they need to stay working there.

This IS working in Northern Ireland tells the story of 11 men and women who are blind or partially sighted. They are working in a wide range of jobs, supporting themselves and their families, contributing to their employer's success and using their energies and talents to further the wealth and wellbeing of our society.

This IS working in Northern Ireland shows how the challenges of sight loss can be overcome in the workplace. It explains how employers can play their part in providing equal opportunities in the job market and describes the resources and support available from RNIB Northern Ireland and elsewhere to employers and to blind and partially sighted job seekers.

Alex Cruz, Micro Focus

“I am employed as first line support with Micro Focus in Belfast. Micro Focus is a global company specialising in the development of advanced enterprise software. I am responsible for any licensing and installation issues that businesses or government agencies who buy our software are having. I log cases and send them on to the appropriate engineer.”



Alex was born with partial albinism and is registered blind but has never let his sight loss hold him back. Having studied in America, he completed a degree in Business Administration and then worked in a range of jobs including as an executive assistant to the CEO of a large financial company in the States.

When he moved to Northern Ireland, he initially applied for a sales position at Micro Focus and got an interview for the job. Although he was not successful in securing the sales position, the company then offered him a job in his current post as first line IT support.

At the initial interview with Micro Focus, Alex was up front with his employer about his sight loss.

“They were very supportive and it just wasn’t an issue. Once I was offered the job, they just asked me, ‘what do you need?’”

As Alex had always worked, he knew exactly what assistive technology he would need.

“I use a magnification software package called ZoomText and this enables me to navigate around the computer easily. My company purchased this for me.”

Once in the job, Alex was introduced to his mentor who took him through his role and responsibilities and helped him to complete any necessary training.

“Because he understood my eye condition he knew that the training needed to be taken one step at a time.”

Alex is now a fully integrated member of the IT team and is very happy in his job.

“Training is ongoing, so I am always learning new things to do with coding and computer languages. It is a paperless environment as well, so there is very little information that I cannot access. My sight loss definitely did not hold me back; once the equipment was put in place and I had been given the necessary training, I was able to do my job fully.

Everyone needs tools to enable them to do their job. It is about understanding that the tools a person with sight loss needs are a bit different from their colleagues with sight; it doesn't mean that they are any less capable of doing the job!”

Mary McDermott, a manager at Micro Focus says: “The fact that Alex has sight loss is irrelevant thanks to the technologies available today. It was clear from Alex's first interview that he was a bright, professional and friendly guy whose skills and experience would be an excellent fit for our First Line Support Team. Since he started he has proven this and gone beyond expectations. The feedback from colleagues and customers alike is excellent. We hope to continue developing his IT skills and product knowledge and to see his career in Micro Focus flourish.”

Brian Mulholland, Support Line Team Leader, commented: “When I was helping to train Alex I only ever had to show him something once and he got it; quite a few people who don't have an eye condition can take longer to pick some of the stuff up; he picked it up so easily. This was made even more impressive by the fact that he didn't seem to take or make use of notes during training.

Also, the speed and work rate that some people may think a person with a sight condition may lack compared to a person who does not have a condition is not a problem that I have noticed with Alex. In conclusion, I don't believe myself or anyone else in the team even considers Alex's eye condition to be an issue when it comes to doing his job.”

“Everyone needs tools to enable them to do their job. It is about understanding that the tools a person with sight loss needs are a bit different from their colleagues with sight; it doesn't mean that they are any less capable of doing the job!”

Andrea Begley, Northern Ireland Civil Service

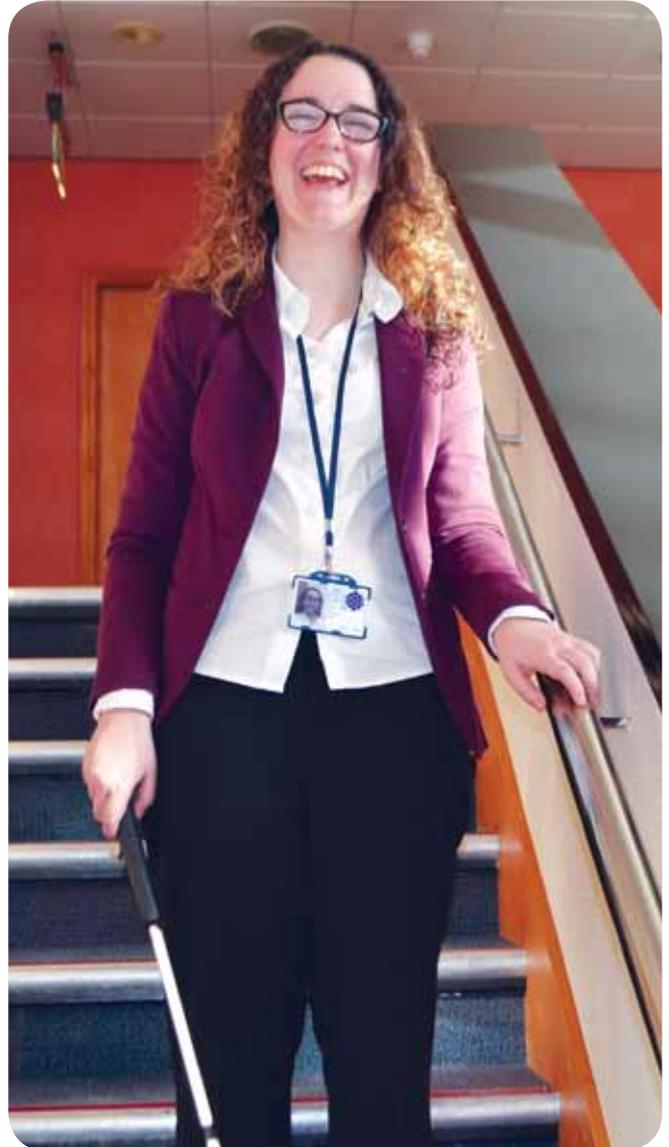
“I am a staff officer working in the Health, Social Services and Public Safety Department of the Northern Ireland Civil Service. The majority of my work is centred on health policy and legislation. Each day can be different but I often have to deal with parliamentary correspondence such as answering questions that have been put to the Minister for Health.”

At around six years old, Andrea developed glaucoma in both eyes and is registered blind.

“I can make out outlines, colours and large shapes but cannot see any fine detail or read written information. Nearly all of my work involves reading and writing and luckily the majority of this can be done on the computer as we are moving to a paperless office. On the rare occasion that I need to read handwritten material, someone in my team can read this out to me so that solves that problem easily.

Prior to starting my job, RNIB came out to meet with me and assessed what technology and equipment would enable me to do my job. My ‘toolkit’ consists of a speech package on my computer called JAWS and a software package called Kurzweil that reads out scanned documents to me.”

Andrea works within a team of seven and they are all very aware of her sight loss. All staff who work alongside her received visual awareness training from RNIB so that they know how to communicate appropriately with someone with sight loss and guide someone if necessary.



“They are extremely supportive and helpful and it is a good working environment,” Andrea says.

Andrea travels throughout the UK and Europe as part of her job sometimes with work colleagues and sometimes on her own.

“Initially travelling on my own did freak me out a bit so I asked other people with sight loss how they did it and got some good advice and tips. Since then I have never looked back and luckily I have had no major travel dilemmas. If I do find myself in difficulty, I just ask a staff member or a member of the public for help.”

When Andrea was still at school, the careers advice that she received did not paint a positive picture and tended to focus on careers that she would not be able to do.

“When I heard this advice, I was gutted, but then I stood back and thought about it and said to myself ‘No!’ there are ways around things and with a bit more effort, hard work and perseverance, I can achieve the things I want to!”

Paul McAuley, Andrea’s line manager, says: “Since her arrival in the Department, Andrea has been like a breath of fresh air. Each task she is set is dealt with a willingness and enthusiasm that is both refreshing and inspiring. Her sight impairment holds her back in no shape or form; she is confident, independent and outgoing and is an important and invaluable member of the team.”

“I feel that employers need to broaden their knowledge on what blind and partially sighted people can do in the workplace. Employers should look at what is possible instead of what is impossible because there are a lot of things that blind and partially sighted people can do.”

Annmarie Houston, RNIB

“I work as a community access/ activity leader with RNIB Northern Ireland. This involves coordinating a variety of activities for blind and partially sighted people. Activities can be as varied as confidence building, yoga classes, book clubs or even tandem cycling!”

The activity leader part of Annemarie’s job entails creating activity and progress in the lives of blind and partially sighted individuals who may not have previously engaged in health and wellbeing opportunities. The community access part includes identifying suitable groups and clubs that are available to people in their local area.



“The aim is to integrate the person into mainstream activities and work with them to overcome any barriers that prevent this from happening.”

Annmarie has a hereditary eye condition called retinitis pigmentosa (RP). The symptoms of RP include tunnel vision and night blindness. In order to access her computer at work, a software package called ZoomText allows Annmarie to alter the size and colour of text on her computer screen. This was paid for through the Access to Work scheme which gives financial assistance to employers who need to make adjustments in the workplace for employees who have a disability.

However, Annmarie was initially reluctant to use the equipment that was put in place to help her.

“Despite needing to use ZoomText, I tried to cope without it switched on. I even turned down the offer of visual awareness training for my colleagues as I was too proud to admit that I was different! This is so ironic now that I advocate and deliver the very same training that was offered to me. I was in denial at the time; my own resistance was my greatest barrier to progress.”

Annmarie spends a lot of her work time out of the office in order to facilitate the wide range of activities that are offered to her clients. She used a guide dog for a number of years to get around independently and is now training to use a white cane. She uses public transport every day.

As her eye condition is degenerative, she is having to make further adjustments.

“Now facing complete blindness, it is becoming necessary for me to use speech software to access my computer. RNIB, in conjunction with the Access to Work scheme, is ensuring that I get the necessary training and equipment to do this. I also have assistance from a support worker for seven hours per week who helps me to read printed material.

I urge potential employers to focus on the additional qualities and abilities the individual will bring to your team. People living with eye conditions are natural problem solvers. They have a unique set of skills and abilities acquired through their own initiative and through developing their own coping strategies. They are keen to perform to the best of their ability and often surpass their sighted colleagues in retaining and retrieving information.

I consider us intuitive people with insight; we have to be fully switched on to stay safe and informed.

In addition to commitment and a determined attitude, a sense of humour is a vital attribute when dealing with the day-to-day encounters sight loss brings. Laughter helps us take ourselves less seriously and sharing funny incidents with colleagues and friends enables others to understand our situation and admire our courage.”

David Barnes, Annmarie’s manager says: “Coming from an employer whose workforce contains a significant number of blind and partially sighted people, including several members of my own team, I had no hesitation when it came to employing Annmarie. Things like accessible technology, having a support worker and mobility training help Annmarie to do her job but it is her determination, creativity, humility and her strong attitude to help blind and partially sighted people that make her excel. Above all, she acts as a role model to other blind and partially sighted people to show how sight loss should never be a barrier to employment.”

Annmarie aspires to running her own business one day. “Coping with sight loss means thinking outside the box and coming up with solutions. When I become an employer, those are exactly the qualities I will be seeking in members of my team!”

“I urge potential employers to focus on the additional qualities and abilities the individual will bring to your team. People living with eye conditions are natural problem solvers. They have a unique set of skills and abilities acquired through their own initiative and through developing their own coping strategies.”

Brenda Weir, NHS

“I am employed as a ward support officer in a large hospital and my job involves providing direct support to five ward managers. My duties include assisting with clerical duties including administration and upkeep of staff personal files, preparation of statistics and returns, assisting with staff duty rosters and a variety of other general clerical duties.”

Brenda was born with partial albinism and nystagmus and is therefore extremely short sighted.

“I have difficulty reading small print and seeing things clearly at a distance.”

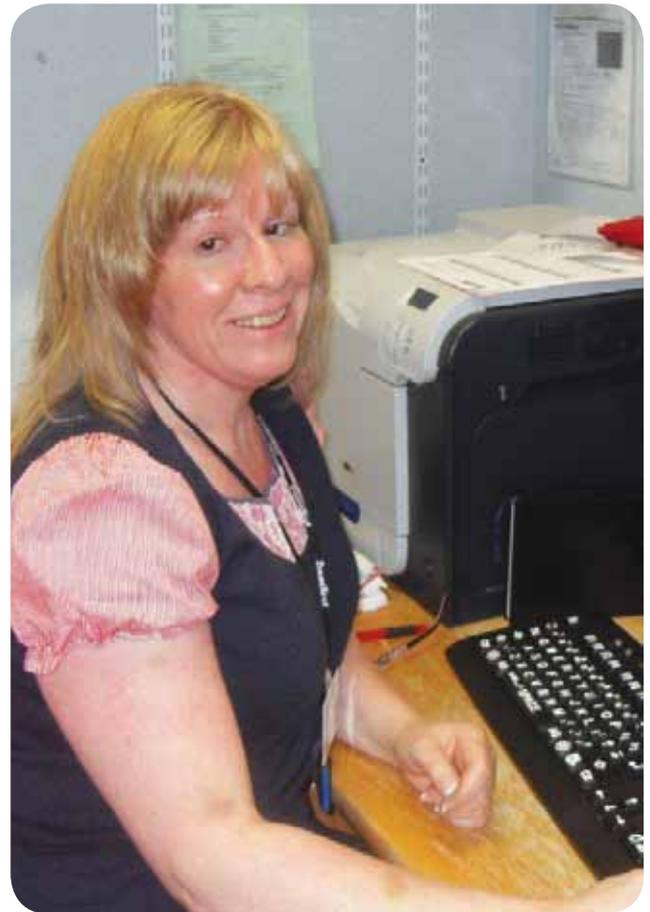
However, she has never let her disability hold her back .

“I attended mainstream education but no support was put in place to help with my sight loss. This proved to be very challenging and required a huge amount of determination and hard work on my part to eventually get the qualifications that I needed.”

Brenda’s ambition was to train as a nurse but the careers advice she received at school was that this would not be possible because of her eye condition. She has been employed in many different roles in various departments within the Civil Service until she was made redundant in 2007. At this point she secured employment as a nursing auxiliary in a local hospital.

In 2008, Brenda was registered as blind and developed a few minor difficulties in her job as nursing auxiliary. As a result of this, her employer struggled to find a suitable position for her so she was placed on the redeployment list and, in the meantime, worked in a clerical role in the HR department of the hospital.

When a vacancy was identified as potentially suitable for Brenda, her employer agreed to utilise the services of RNIB to provide guidance and support in deciding how best to adapt the post to make it suitable for her.



An RNIB technology officer met with Brenda and her employer and recommended equipment that she would need to work in this role. As she would be required to work on five different wards, equipment needed to be set up in each office on the ward and some portable items were necessary. Brenda was provided with an electronic magnifier, large monitor and keyboard, and ZoomText magnification software. She also received weekly IT training from the RNIB technology officer in how to use Microsoft Word, PowerPoint, Outlook and Excel.

Key staff who Brenda works with also received visual awareness training delivered by RNIB staff.

Every day, Brenda is working within a different team, so on a weekly basis she is interacting with a large amount of different staff members working at various levels.

“I enjoy the challenge of such a diverse role. Working in an acute environment in a very busy hospital with my visual impairment requires a lot of determination and effort, but with a huge desire to overcome my difficulties, and my aspiration to keep up with my peers, I make full use of the assistive technology, and am able to fulfil my duties to the required standard.

I find that when I take the time to explain my disability, and people have a better understanding, then they are more willing to help me when I ask them to.”

Brenda’s advice to employers would be: “Please give people with visual impairment the same chance as you would give to others, get them the proper equipment they require and remember that visual impairment doesn’t mean that someone is academically different – I was given the chance and I’ve proved it can work.”

“I find that when I take the time to explain my disability, and people have a better understanding, then they are more willing to help me when I ask them to.”

Damien Sarsfield, Capita

“I work as a distribution and complaints administrator with HR Connect. HR Connect is a part of Capita and deals with all the payroll, recruitment and HR queries for the Northern Ireland Civil Service.”

Damien was born with an eye condition called optic atrophy, but it didn't have any effect on his sight until he was about 12 years old. The condition causes the nerves at the back of the eye to die.

“Everything that I see out of my left eye is blurry. I do have some sight in my right eye but cannot read small print or make out any fine detail.”



When Damien started his job with HR Connect, the Access to Work scheme arranged for RNIB to come out to his workplace to recommend any adjustments that would help him to do his job.

“Nearly everything that I need to do in my job is done using the computer; there is very little paper involved. RNIB recommended that I have magnification software for my computer, a larger monitor and a large print keyboard. On the rare occasion that there is something on paper, my colleagues are more than happy to read it for me.”

Any training sessions that Damien needs to take part in at work are done on a one-to-one basis. “My employer always does its best to accommodate me.”

Damien has never let his sight loss hold him back in any job that he has done. He has always been open and honest about his sight loss with his employers and colleagues.

“I feel it's the best way to be, I am not going to hide the fact that I have a visual impairment, there's just no point. If I don't inform my employer, then I am not going to get the equipment that I need to do my job.”

Damien's line manager, Ross McLean, says: “Damien is a pleasure to work with. His sight loss is not an issue – he comes to work and gets the job done!”

Tim Stewart, a work colleague, says: “I’ve been working with Damien now for five years and I often forget that he has a visual impairment! Damien works around his sight loss very effectively. I enjoy working with him.”

Damien is keen for other people with sight loss to be given opportunities to work. “My advice to employers would be – don’t be frightened of people with sight loss, they can still do the job that people with sight can do – with the right support; take a chance, you’d be surprised!”

“I am not going to hide the fact that I have a visual impairment, there’s just no point. If I don’t inform my employer, then I am not going to get the equipment that I need to do my job.”



John McNamee, physiotherapist

“I am a self employed physiotherapist working in the centre of Derry City. My work involves the assessment and treatment of back, neck pain and other musculoskeletal injuries for patients who are referred to my clinic. In addition to the usual work of a physiotherapist, I also use acupuncture as part of my treatment for most clients.”

As John is totally blind, he has had to make adjustments to ensure that he is able to do his job.

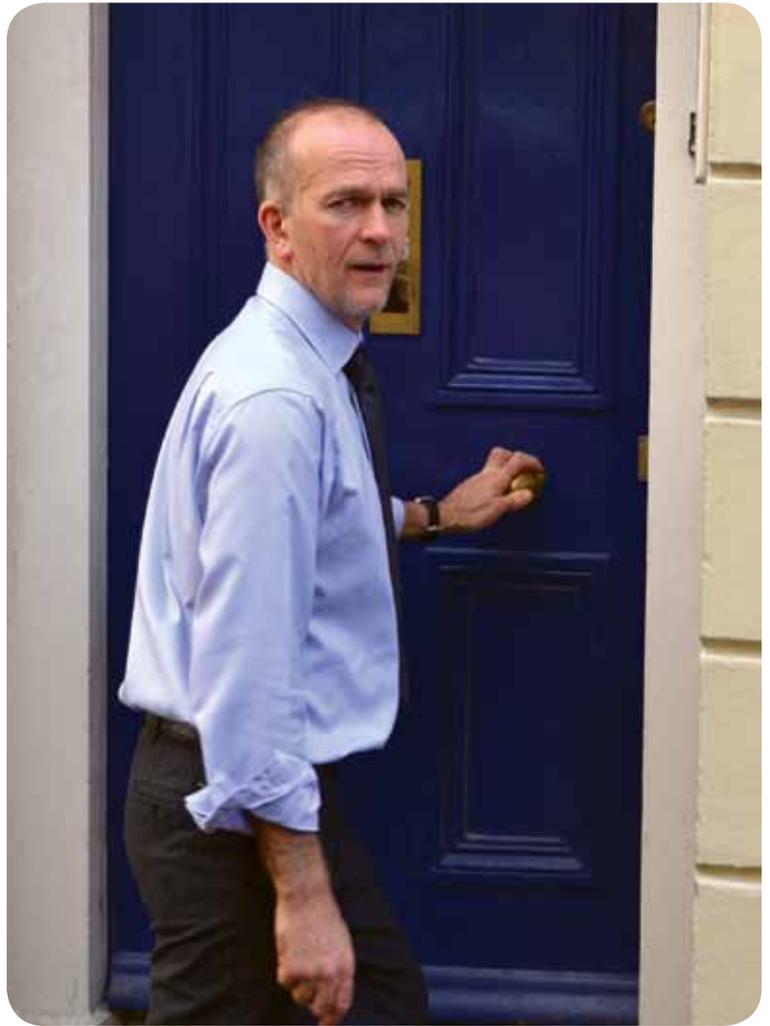
“The essential ingredient in working solo as a blind person is having control of one’s environment and the technology to overcome the access to print problem.

Firstly, in the clinic, the furniture is organised in such a way that I can move around freely between two rooms. At first glance my workspace looks like any other physiotherapy clinic except that both rooms are identical and chairs are placed in such a way that the client never has to walk in front of me.

Similarly the number and position of phones and intercoms in the rooms, the placement of equipment, appointment cards etc are all designed in a way that allows me to work efficiently without sight. Speech technology on my computer allows me to maintain patient records and book appointments without assistance. All of these things are fairly minor adaptations but allow me to do my job effectively.”

Prior to being self employed, John worked as a physiotherapist in various London hospitals and private practices before moving home to Derry.

“Physiotherapy is a popular choice of career for blind and partially sighted people and my work experiences have always been positive.



Recently I have been receiving training from RNIB staff who are helping me to make the most of the technology that I use in the workplace, for example word processing, email, internet and my iPhone.

What I would like to say to employers is that if a blind or partially sighted person applies for a job then the chances are that he or she has already adapted to their particular visual impairment and work is merely an extension of their normal life. Employers should not be afraid to ask how sight loss might affect how someone is going to do a job. Societal attitudes to disability are on the move, be a part of the change and not an obstacle to it.”

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Leo Murphy, Boots the Chemist

“I work as a customer care ambassador with Boots the Chemist in Belfast. I have been working in this role since November 2008 and can honestly say I really enjoy my job. A lot of what I do involves promotional work and ensuring the customer has an excellent shopping experience in the store. I help customers locate products and make sure that they are getting the assistance they need.

I was born with congenital cataracts and as a result have 80 per cent sight loss. All of my useful vision is in my right eye; I have no sight in my left eye. I have difficulty recognising people and have poor distance vision.”

Leo has returned to employment, having given up work for some time to care for his wife who was ill.

“After my wife passed away, I began to consider returning to work. I met with an employment officer from RNIB and we began applying for jobs straight away. I wanted to go into retail as I enjoyed customer interaction.”

Leo initially completed a telephone interview for his job with Boots followed by a face-to-face interview.

“From the start, I was upfront with my employer about my sight loss and it wasn’t an issue. To do my job, I don’t need any major adjustments. If I need to read anything, I have a handheld magnifier that I use to read post and small print on packaging. I know the store like the back of my hand and I am always keeping a close eye on where products are and, if anything is moved, I find out where it has been moved to.”

Leo works in a team of between 40–50 people and they all know about his sight loss and are always there to help him out if he is having difficulty with anything.

“If a colleague notices that I am struggling to find a product for a customer, they are there immediately to help out. I couldn’t ask for better support.

Everyday in my job is different and I am always meeting new people; going to work is really the social highlight of my week, its great!

My advice to employers is not to let sight loss stand in the way of employing a person; they have as much to offer as a fully sighted person.

My advice to people with sight loss looking for work is that you need to understand that looking for a job is in fact a job in itself! It takes time, patience and perseverance. If you stay dedicated and motivated, you will get a job – I did.”

“My advice to employers is not to let sight loss stand in the way of employing a person; they have as much to offer as a fully sighted person.”



Ruth McMillan, Fold Housing Association

“I work as a domestic assistant with the Fold Housing Association. I work between two folds for elderly people in Belfast and have been working here since 2008. I love it, all the residents know me, it’s a huge part of my life and I get a great deal of enjoyment from it!”



Ruth is registered blind and was born with an eye condition called coloboma and as a result of this has no sight in her right eye. She does have good useful vision in her left eye which allows her to read small print and make out facial features.

Prior to her current job, Ruth hadn’t worked in almost 27 years. “I was a carer for my elderly mother for a long time. When my mother passed away, I decided that it was time to start looking at returning to work, I knew I wasn’t destined to sit in the house.”

Ruth made a visit to the RNIB and met with the employment officer who looked at what jobs would be suitable for her with her level of sight. She started applying for jobs and got an interview for the job she is currently doing.

“I was absolutely delighted when I got the job, I honestly didn’t think there would be anything I could do but I now know there is plenty.”

Ruth was very honest about her sight loss right from the interview stage and explained how she was able to do all the tasks of the job.

“My employer’s attitude was, if you can clean at home, there is no reason why you can’t do it in the fold. This was so refreshing to hear and made me want the job all the more.”

A typical day’s work for Ruth includes cleaning, polishing, hoovering, emptying bins, washing windows and changing beds in the guests’ rooms. Ruth doesn’t have any difficulties in her job and knows the layout of the fold like the back of her hand. A few minor adjustments to her workplace allow her to do her job.

“Bump-ons have been attached to the buttons in the lift. These are stickers with raised material on them to help me identify which floor I am going to. My employer was concerned about getting cleaning products mixed up. So there is a picture of a sink on the product used in the kitchen and a picture of a toilet for the product used in the bathroom, so I know which one to use, its easy!

Everyone has a place in the world of work and that includes people with sight loss. You should never just give up!”

Janice, a colleague who works with Ruth says: “I have been working with Ruth for over four years now. When I first met Ruth and she told me about her sight loss, I initially thought to myself, how could she ever do a cleaning job if she has difficulty with her vision? But after seeing everything that Ruth can do in the job, I now know that people with sight loss are very capable of working. Ruth always gives 100 per cent in the job, is truly dedicated and is an asset to the team.”

“My employer’s attitude was, if you can clean at home, there is no reason why you can’t do it in the fold. This was so refreshing to hear and made me want the job all the more.”



Sam Bowers, Northern Ireland Water

“I have been working for Northern Ireland Water for nearly 19 years now and currently work in Central Administration Services in an administrative role. I am responsible for processing staff wages, logging staff mileage, overtime and transport usage.”

Sam was born with an eye condition called congenital optical atrophy but didn't realise he had this until he was in his teens.



Initially, Sam worked in the distribution section of Northern Ireland Water travelling throughout County Down seeing to faults people had with their water supply, carrying out repairs and digging holes to maintain underground water pipes.

From 2006, Sam did start to notice deterioration in his sight and this was affecting his ability to do his job.

“It was becoming increasingly difficult for me to read the street names and numbers when I was going out to fix a fault at a customer's house. I knew all wasn't right with my eyes, but it wasn't something I dwelled upon. I had always led a full and active life. I had no real issues at work and still drove.”

It was at a medical that Sam's sight deterioration was picked up and it was confirmed that it would not be safe for him to drive with his level of sight. Following on from this, it was decided that, due to the nature of Sam's job, it would be too dangerous for Sam to continue working in his role.

HR at Northern Ireland Water suggested to Sam that he consider working in an administrative role in the office. Sam had never worked in an office before and had minimal computer skills but he was determined to make it work.

“A technology officer from RNIB came out to see me at my workplace to carry out a technical assessment. She looked at everything that would be required to do my job and recommended equipment that would enable me to carry out the duties with my level of sight.”

Sam has difficulty reading small print and seeing fine detail. A magnification package, ZoomText, was recommended in order to use his computer. To read paper documents, magnification equipment was recommended. RNIB also provided training to him on how to use the equipment.

Sam now feels confident in his role and does not let his sight loss restrict him. If he is having any difficulties, he feels comfortable to go and ask for help from another member of staff. He is very open about his sight loss and feels being open and honest is the best way.

“NI Water has been incredibly supportive over the past three years. If someone had said to me at the time when my sight was deteriorating that I would be working in an admin role, I think I would have just laughed. At the time I thought, right, this is it, my job is over and I had no idea that NI Water would consider keeping me on in a different role, especially one that was world’s apart from what I was doing.

My sight loss journey could have been one of doom and gloom, but thanks to a supportive employer, I can honestly say that it wasn’t.

My advice to employers out there is not to make assumptions about people with sight loss; they deserve a chance in employment. With the right support and with people and organisations working together, it can work, just give it a go!”

Sam’s line manager, Anne Marie commented: “Working closely with the RNIB employment officer, HR and line management, any apprehensions or issues were looked at, discussed and solutions found. IT equipment required due to his sight impairment to allow him to carry out his office duties was identified and purchased, resulting in Sam becoming a fully competent member of the team.”

“My sight loss journey could have been one of doom and gloom, but thanks to a supportive employer, I can honestly say that it wasn’t.”

Siobhan Fox, Belfast Metropolitan College

“I work in the role of campus administrator at Belfast Metropolitan College. I provide information to students and complete a range of admin tasks such as enrolment of students, administering grants and travel passes, dealing with central enquiries, data entry of exam results and logging monies. The interaction with the students is the part of the job that I enjoy the most and I get great satisfaction in helping them in whatever way I can to get the most out of their college experience.



It was on returning to work from a summer holiday that Siobhan first noticed deterioration in her sight. “I found that I couldn’t read things properly and was having difficulty seeing the computer screen. I panicked and thought: ‘Am I going to have to give up my job?’ I was incredibly nervous and apprehensive and became quite emotional about my sight loss. I didn’t know how I was going to manage the work duties with the sight that I had left.”

Fortunately, Siobhan got in touch with the RNIB Eye Clinic Liaison Officer at her local hospital who reassured her that there was help available and put her in touch with the RNIB Employment Service. On advice from RNIB, Siobhan explained to her employer the difficulties she was having and an RNIB technical assessment was carried out to recommend equipment that would help her in her job. Through the Access to Work scheme, Siobhan received magnification and scanning software, and desktop and hand-held magnifiers. Once the new equipment was in place, training was arranged through Neil, the RNIB technology officer.

“Without the weekly training sessions, I wouldn’t be able to do my job. I can do my job using the computer, but in a completely different way. Neil’s training, support and patience has been invaluable to me. If I am finding something difficult to do on the computer, Neil works with me to find a solution.

When I first developed sight loss, I never imagined that I would be able to work confidently in my job again. With the support of the RNIB Employment Service and Eye Clinic Liaison Officer service, I have retrained in my role and I can confidently say that I walk out of work happy. I find it hard to believe the change sometimes.”

Siobhan’s advice to anyone whose sight begins to deteriorate in work is to: “Firstly face up to what is happening to you and let people know. Then use the support that is available to you.”

Siobhan’s advice to employers who have an employee who develops sight loss is: “Find out what the person’s needs are; don’t just make assumptions as to what they can and can’t do. Use the support and training that is available to employers from RNIB. Staff should all receive visual awareness training to help them understand the needs of a co-worker who has sight loss.”

Barbara Vance, (Siobhan’s Line Manager) commented that: “In the earlier days Siobhan was still coming to terms with her sight loss and her confidence in her ability to do her job had taken a huge knock. Now, when I look at Siobhan, I see a confident and happy woman who is more than able to do her job. She has a wealth of knowledge and always helps out other staff when something they are unsure of arises. Siobhan’s sheer determination combined with the ongoing and invaluable support from RNIB has allowed her to learn how to do her job again. Her sight loss is not an issue and Siobhan doesn’t let it hold her back. She is an inspiration to everyone at the college.”



“With the support of the RNIB Employment Service and Eye Clinic Liaison Officer service, I have retrained in my role and I can confidently say that I walk out of work happy. I find it hard to believe the change sometimes.”

Leonora Little, North West Regional College

“I work as a careers adviser for the North West Regional College and I am based at the Derry City campus. My job involves working with students of a variety of ages, providing them with information, advice and guidance on course selection and career progression in relation to employment, training and further education.”



The North West Regional College is a leading provider of further and higher education and skills training in Northern Ireland. 20,000 students achieve their personal educational goals, through full and part-time study at the college every year.

“I was born with cataracts and I also developed glaucoma in my early teens. This mainly affects the distance at which I can see things and how defined things appear to me.

Prior to my current employment, I went to university in Edinburgh, and studied Psychology. Once I finished university, I completed a Postgrad in Careers at the University of Ulster.

My current employer has been absolutely great in helping me adapt to working life. I use magnification software on my computer, a large print keyboard and a handheld paper magnifier.

I have found that doing my job is all about adapting, using what I call ‘tricks of the trade’ for getting around things.

I really enjoy my job, because I feel that in a very small way I am helping people to see their career potential by providing them with options.

I have found that the biggest challenge to having a sight problem is as much a psychological one as a physical one. If you think you can do something, you probably can. Having an understanding and supportive employer and team of work colleagues makes me feel included and have trust in my own capabilities.”

“I have found that doing my job is all about adapting, using what I call ‘tricks of the trade’ for getting around things.”

Access to Work scheme

Access to Work (NI) can help people with sight loss who wish to take up employment, or who are in work and experience difficulties related to their disability. It can also help employers who wish to recruit or retain people with sight loss in employment.

How can Access to Work (NI) help you

Access to Work (NI) is available to overcome the practical problems caused by disability. It can help towards the cost of:

- special aids and equipment
- adaptations to premises and equipment
- support workers
- travel to work.

If you want more information or wish to apply for assistance through this scheme, you should contact an employment service adviser in your local Jobs and Benefits office or JobCentre.

www.nidirect.gov.uk/index/contacts/contacts-az/jobs-and-benefits-offices.htm

You can also contact the RNIB Employment and Technology Service who can provide additional guidance on this.

RNIB Northern Ireland Employment and Technology Service

RNIB Northern Ireland's Employment and Technology Service supports:

- blind and partially sighted job seekers
- people trying to keep their jobs when losing their sight
- employers
- organisations involved in training, guidance and employment services.

RNIB Northern Ireland helps employers to recruit blind and partially sighted people. We provide information on:

- the reality of sight loss – facts and myths about blindness
- employers' responsibilities under the Disability Discrimination Act – many employers are unaware that the Act covers their recruitment and retention practices
- guidelines on recruitment and selection
- using psychometric tests in recruitment

- the Access to Work scheme – this is one of the most effective interventions that can help blind and partially sighted people in work. The provision of specialist equipment and other support is government funded
- job retention: enabling employers to retain the expertise and experience of an employee who is losing their sight
- access technology – our technology specialists offer advice and individual or group training on a wide range of technology, including video magnifiers, screen magnification, JAWS and other speech generating software, braille technology and web accessibility.

If you have an employment query and would like to talk to one of the team, please call us at either our Belfast or Derry/Londonderry offices or email: employmentni@rnib.org.uk

Other RNIB services available

Eye Care Liaison Officer (ECLLO) service offers emotional and practical support at the point of diagnosis of an eye condition. This service is available at the 12 main eye clinics, and the optometric practices (opticians), across Northern Ireland.

Community access services works alongside health and social care professionals throughout Northern Ireland, and currently runs activity programmes from all our sites.

Benefits advice offers a benefits check and advisory service (free of charge) for blind and partially sighted people. Our qualified advisers can provide support and information on the full range of social security benefits.

Resource centres/shops offer the latest equipment and resources to assist blind and partially sighted people to live full active and independent lives. We have shops at our main locations throughout Northern Ireland and the Isle of Man. The team can also be found at numerous events across the region.

RNIB Membership not only entitles members to a host of benefits, but places you at the heart of our organisation giving you a real say in how RNIB carries out its work now and in the future.

Sound Vision Ulster is a locally produced bi-monthly audio magazine providing information and entertainment for blind and partially sighted people across Northern Ireland and beyond.

Children and youth services deliver a range of services to children and young people with sight loss, their families, and the professionals who work with them.

Share Holiday Village chalet at Lisnaskea, Fermanagh is available for hire for the benefit of groups or individual families with blind or partially sighted members. sharevillage.org

Volunteering with RNIB Northern Ireland is a great opportunity for blind and partially sighted people of all ages as well as for those without sight loss. We invest in and assist all our volunteers through training and line management support.

Accessible media services transform printed material into accessible formats for blind and partially sighted people. Our clients include individuals, charities, utilities, businesses and government agencies.

RNIB Isle of Man services provide specialist rehabilitation and low vision therapy to blind and partially sighted people on the Isle of Man. We offer an ECLO and resource centre service here also.

RNIB Northern Ireland Campaigns team campaign to achieve positive change for blind and partially sighted people. We lobby politicians, civil servants, public and commercial bodies and the media at local, regional and national level. Our Active Campaigners Network offers people an opportunity to become involved in this work.

Lisburn in Focus project, funded by the Big Lottery Fund, will turn the City of Lisburn into a world class model of excellence for people with sight loss. The project will run for five years to 2014. Contact: lisburninfocus@rnib.org.uk

Sensory Engagement Programme (SEP) is a cross-border project, which focuses on improving the lives of people with hearing and sight loss and is a partnership between the four leading organisations supporting people with sensory loss throughout the Island of Ireland. Contact: rnib.org.uk/sensoryengagement

For more information on any of our services please contact:

Website: rnib.org.uk/northernireland

Email: rnibni@rnib.org.uk

Facebook: [facebook.com/RNIBNorthernIreland](https://www.facebook.com/RNIBNorthernIreland)

RNIB Northern Ireland (Head Office)
40 Linenhall Street
Belfast
Co Antrim
BT2 8BA
Tel: 028 9032 9373

RNIB Northern Ireland
Embassy Building
3 Strand Road
Derry/LDerry
BT48 7BH
Tel: 028 7136 6060

RNIB Northern Ireland
24 Mountjoy Road
Omagh
Co Tyrone
BT79 7AY
Tel: 028 8225 0220

RNIB Northern Ireland
37 Abbey Street
Coleraine
Derry/LDerry
BT52 1EX
Tel: 028 7032 0333

Lisburn In Focus
Rawdon House
45–47 Market Square
Lisburn
Co Antrim
BT28 1AD
Tel: 028 9260 0388
Email: lisburninfocus@rnib.org.uk

RNIB Northern Ireland
Accessible Media
159 Durham Street
Belfast
Co Antrim
BT12 4GB
Tel: 028 9050 1888

RNIB Isle of Man
Corrin Court
Heywood Avenue
Onchan
Isle of Man
IM3 3AP
Tel: 016 2467 7626