Development of Services 1793-2018

Since our humble beginnings as a foundation providing meaningful work to just a handful of people with sight loss, over the past two centuries, Royal Blind has evolved to become the largest vision impairment organisation in Scotland. We have a rich history of supporting, caring for, educating and employing people with vision impairment. In the past decade, we have embarked upon a period of significant expansion, establishing several new services for people with vision impairment of all ages.

The chronology below sets out what services were offered over our 225 year history. This provides some historical context for the main discussion of this booklet which looks at the approach of Royal Blind to supporting people who are vision impaired over time, and how services have been offered, to whom and for what purpose. More information about the organisation’s history and development of services can be accessed by visiting www.royalblind.org/our-organisation/our-history.
1793 The Edinburgh Asylum for the Relief of the Indigent and Industrious Blind (now known as Royal Blind) was founded. It became the third foundation dedicated to improving the welfare of blind people in the world. Nine male trainees were taught handicrafts as a means of gaining employment and actively supporting themselves. An Educational Unit established by the Royal Blind Asylum provided rudimentary mental arithmetic and recitation of scripture lessons to complement instruction in handicrafts.

1806 Royal Blind purchased the Nicholson Street Workshops. These were permanent premises to expand their training for blind men in handicrafts. Further premises were purchased at Nicholson Street in 1822 to provide women with an opportunity to develop employability skills producing a wide range of knitted and sewn products.

1825 Royal Blind began providing residential care at the ‘Home for Poor Blind Women’ at Hill Place.

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1875 The Educational Unit at the Royal Blind Asylum amalgamated with the School for Blind Children (founded by Mr. James Gall in 1835) becoming the ‘Royal Blind Asylum and School’. The facility was based at newly constructed premises in Craigmillar Park, Edinburgh. The 41 children attending the privately-run residential school were provided with lessons in arithmetic, braille printing, English, geography, history and recitation.

1876 The Home for Poor Blind Women moved to Craigmillar Park. This became the main premises for the Royal Blind Asylum and School.

1891 A department of the Royal Blind School began commercial braille production at Craigmillar Park. Early production concentrated on the production of religious and educational materials in braille, pioneered by Louis Braille in 1829, involving cells of six raised dots depicting letters of the alphabet.
1898 Royal Blind received a Royal Charter.

1915 Royal Blind founded Scottish War Blinded to support the increasing numbers of servicemen returning to Scotland from World War One with life changing vision impairments. At Newington House support was provided through a programme of rehabilitation and training to establish a strong foundation towards employability and independence. Members learned to read and write in braille, to navigate home and public environments as well as receiving training in basket and mat production, boot and shoe repairing, poultry farming and piano tuning. Upon leaving Newington House, a £150 grant was provided to support the setting up of businesses and purchasing of equipment or accommodation assisted by the charity’s after-care workers.

1929 The Thomas Burns Home opened as a dedicated premises for the provision of residential care for blind women. As many residents became elderly, a shift towards the provision of nursing care replaced many of the industrial activities that flourished at Craigmillar Park. As the Royal Blind School also continued to develop in the late 1920’s, it was no longer feasible to share its Craigmillar premises with the residential services. The newly constructed facility provided residential rooms, workspaces and recreational areas.

1933 The Royal Blind School was completely reorganised to extend the provision of secondary education and accommodate pre-school children. As a result of rising pupil intake, a new classroom block was erected by 1939 and the school remained open during World War Two.

1943 Scottish War Blinded acquired Linburn House in Wilkieston, West Lothian to support blinded servicemen and women returning to Scotland from World War Two. Built upon the successes of Newington House, members received a year’s induction course learning to read and write in braille, touch-typing and basket making before choosing a range of training and employment opportunities in woodworking, carpentry, metal, wire and leather workshops as well as in outside employment as physiotherapists, typists and shop keepers with additional support from the charity’s after-care workers.

1945 The Royal Blind School purchased Barrie House to provide a separate location for pre-school children.

1946 Oswald House was purchased to provide additional facilities for the education of younger primary school pupils.

1950s Linburn House became Linburn Workshops. Within ten years, Linburn House (acquired by Scottish War Blinded in 1943) was replaced with a modern complex of rehabilitation rooms, workshops, a recreation hall, homes, hostelry and a bowling green. A strong industrial emphasis developed, based on the principles of community and camaraderie, where a wide range of products were developed and produced for the public and industry for over 50 years.

1953 The Scottish Braille Press opened. Braille production, carried out by a department at the Craigmillar school since 1891, moved to an independent purpose built facility on the Craigmillar campus in 1953 under the operating name of the Scottish Braille Press. The new premises created skilled working opportunities and 13 new roles, bringing the total to 36 full-time employees. A large number of these employees were registered blind.

1953 The Royal Blind School opened Muirburn House providing education to vision impaired children with additional disabilities in terms of speech, movement or comprehension.

1954 Drever House was purchased to provide additional facilities for the education of younger primary school pupils. Such developments were perceived as a brave step forward for the provision of specialist schools following the Education (Scotland) Act 1918.
1945 which prescribed an integrative approach to mainstream education for pupils with disabilities.

1970 The newly constructed Thomas Burns Home was opened by the Institution’s Patron, Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother. By the 1960s demand for places at the home had exceeded capacity and the Board made the decision to extend the Thomas Burns Home so all residential nursing care would be provided within one location.

1991 Canaan Lodge opened in Morningside. This new educational facility was Scotland’s first purpose-built school for pupils with multiple disabilities as well as vision impairment (MDVI). Pupils with vision impairment and no other disabilities continued to receive education and care at the residential school in Craigmillar Park. Canaan Lodge included five interconnected houses accommodating six pupils and staff providing bedrooms, classrooms, dining and kitchen area, relaxation and bathrooms. The design encouraged pupils to develop independent living skills within a safe environment, and establish rapport, trust and communication with fellow pupils and teaching staff. The facility also included a recreational sports hall, hydrotherapy pool, centres for speech therapy and physiotherapy, and a medical room. Sheltered play areas provided pupils an opportunity to explore their senses and develop an understanding of the natural world.

1991 Canaan Home also opened in Morningside. The new premises merged the Thomas Burns Home and Muirburn House and provided accommodation for 72 male and female residents in four houses. Each of the houses provided single and double rooms offering maximum comfort.
2010 Forward Vision was established to provide support for young adults with vision impairment and additional disabilities. The service was set up by managers from the Royal Blind School, who were finding that there was a lack of appropriate places for young adults with multiple disabilities and vision impairment to go to when they left school.

2011 Scottish War Blinded launched an Outreach Service for veterans with sight loss. The service has Outreach Workers across Scotland providing a one-stop contact point for dealing with statutory and voluntary agencies, specialist equipment provision, mobility and independent living support and introducing social opportunities.

2016 Craigmillar Park pupils joined fellow pupils at the newly refurbished campus in Canaan Lane, Morningside. In 2012 Royal Blind revised its education strategy in response to greater numbers of vision impaired pupils integrating into mainstream schools with the assistance of local authority special units for pupils with disabilities. This led to the two educational campuses at Morningside and Craigmillar Park merging, and a major re-development of the school buildings in Morningside.

2017 Scottish War Blinded opened the Hawkhead Centre. This facility in Paisley is for veterans with sight loss, irrespective of cause. It is an activity hub for men and women of all ages and abilities - and is open free of any costs.

2018 The Scottish Braille Press relocated. Due to record growth, the Scottish Braille Press moved to a larger building in Robertson Avenue to accommodate its expanding client base and workforce.

1999 Elderly residents moved from Canaan Home to Braeside House, a purpose-built care home for older people with sight loss. Located in Liberton Brae in Edinburgh, residents enjoy en-suite single bedrooms, rooftop and sensory gardens plus hairdressing, podiatry and physiotherapy facilities. Residents also enjoy regular day excursions and a busy activity programme within the home.

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Royal Blind today runs the following services:

- The Royal Blind School - specialist education for young people aged up to 18 years.
- Royal Blind Learning Hub - supporting teachers of vision impaired pupils in the mainstream sector.
- Adult Services - 24-hour residential care and short breaks for adults with vision impairment and additional disabilities. These include Allermuir and Forward Vision, both located in Edinburgh.
- Care for Older People - care homes specialising in care for vision impaired older people. Jenny's Well is in Paisley and Braeside House is in Edinburgh.
- The Scottish Braille Press - a leading provider of high-quality braille, large print and audio transcription services.
- Kidscene - an after school and holiday club for children with and without disabilities.

Royal Blind’s sister charity Scottish War Blinded runs:

- Activity Hubs - for veterans with sight loss: the Linburn Centre in West Lothian and the Hawkhead Centre in Paisley.
- Outreach Service - to assist veterans with sight loss to develop confidence in carrying out day-to-day tasks through the provision of specialist vision impairment equipment and training.
Introduction

This year Royal Blind celebrates its 225th anniversary. Established in 1793, it is one of Scotland’s oldest charities and the oldest national organisation in the world to serve blind people of all ages. Together with its sister charity, Scottish War Blinded, Royal Blind provides care, education, employment and accessible media for people with sight loss. The organisation’s vision today is for ‘a community in which blind and partially sighted people, including those who have other disabilities, are fully included and lead fulfilling lives.’

In celebration of the organisation’s anniversary, this publication looks at how Royal Blind has approached the ‘social inclusion’ of blind and partially sighted people over more than two centuries. Wherever possible, this story is told from the perspective of people who used and delivered the services, offering insights into their personal understanding and experiences of inclusion. In particular, the booklet covers experiences relating to employment, education, care, independent living and the use of technology and accessible media. This booklet aims to offer insight into how the services offered by Royal Blind have changed according to expectations and aspirations for the inclusion of blind and partially sighted people over time.

The publication has been developed through a small number of individual (5) and focus group interviews (11) with people who have been involved with the charity, either as members or as employees. Thank you to all of those who gave their time to be interviewed or set up interviews. Historical data is drawn from Royal Blind’s own archives, and from published and unpublished written materials. Thanks to all those who gave their help in the research including Iain Hutchison, Ken Reid, Fred Reid and Jim McCafferty.
Historical Context

Royal Blind was originally founded by Reverend Dr David Johnson, Dr Thomas Blacklock and David Miller in 1793 as the Edinburgh Asylum for the Relief of the Indigent and Industrious Blind. It aimed to provide vocational skills, training and education to blind people as a means to support independent living as part of a wider philanthropic movement directed towards addressing economic poverty and effecting social and moral improvement. One of its key objectives, as later set out in the Royal Charter in 1838, was to: “promote the moral, religious, physical and mental welfare of the blind.” There was particular concern at this time for the moral welfare of blind people due to the fact that they were unable to read the bible. Above all, however, “the central goal of the organization was to alleviate economic poverty and to enable the blind to work.” Labour was considered a moral virtue in its own right, and the key to social improvement. The charity began educating children in 1875 when its educational unit amalgamated with the School for Blind Children (which had been set up by James Gall, a local printer and publisher, in 1835) and became the Royal Blind Asylum and School.

From a contemporary perspective, historical accounts of this time depict a segmented and paternalistic approach to improving the welfare of “the blind”, often reliant on coercive control. This is in contrast to the current rights-based discourse which aims to promote equality of opportunity for the individual. It could be said that the organization’s purpose has broadly shifted from enabling the blind to conform to the social norms and aspirations of the day, to one of empowering vision impaired people to participate as fully as possible in society, according to their individual needs and ambitions. Rather than set out a linear account of the development of Royal Blind over the last 225 years, this publication draws out areas of commonality and divergence in how people involved with Royal Blind have approached and experienced education, employment and care services over time, through the lens of inclusion. It then goes on to look at expectations and aspirations for independent living, and the impact of alternative formats and technological advances.

1 Phillips, G 2004 The Blind in British Society: Charity State and Community
2 The Royal Blind Asylum and School 200 Years of Service 1793-1993 p.4
3 Phillips, G 2004 The Blind in British Society: Charity State and Community
The intention behind setting up blind institutions in the first half of the nineteenth century was expressly to help people to generate their own income in order to support themselves financially. The Scottish institutions were different from their English counterparts in that their approach to achieving this was to provide both schooling and employment to their ‘inmates’ rather than training their pupils to earn their own livelihoods outside the institution. The former was the model on which the Royal Blind Asylum and School was founded and remained its central focus for most of the 19th century.

Today, Royal Blind’s Scottish Braille Press continues to provide employment to a number of vision impaired people as part of its workforce. Lessons in habilitation and independent living skills are provided at the Royal Blind School to support pupils who are preparing to access the workplace. The section on independent living skills covers the support offered by Scottish War Blinded through the Hawkhead and Linburn Centres. This section covers the work of the Scottish Braille Press and looks more broadly at how experiences of employment have changed, from the perspective of people who were either former pupils at the Royal Blind School or have been involved in delivering and designing services for Royal Blind.

In 1837, Thomas Anderson, (previous manager of the Royal Blind Asylum and School, as the charity was known at the time) set out the distinction between the asylum system adopted by institutions in Scotland from the English school system thus: “[t]he design of schools for the blind is to instruct young persons for a few years, then let them go to provide for themselves as well as they can. On the other hand, that of an asylum is not only to teach them, but to employ them after they are taught.”[4] He highlighted what he saw as the advantages to the asylum system and commended the Royal Blind Asylum and School for its success, quoting a report: “[t]his comes nearer than any other to the attainment of the great object of such institutions, viz., enabling the pupils to support themselves of their own efforts.”[5] Philanthropists of the time were keen to keep blind people from the poorhouses and offer them an opportunity to support themselves. The aim was to support ‘able bodied paupers’ to realise their potential as productive workers with all the social value this afforded. Within the discourse of social and moral improvement, it could be said the aim of the Royal Blind Reylum, similar to other charities dedicated to the care and welfare of the blind at the time, was to assimilate the blind into “an industrious class.” According to Phillips “the goal sought was the involvement of the blind in a community whose cohesion and mutual support derived from the acceptance of shared moral values and standards of conduct.”[6] The focus was not on alleviating poverty through handouts, but on income generation, and the Royal Blind Reylum was therefore selective of its workers in the nineteenth century, only taking in blind people who they considered physically able to work.[7]

When the organisation was founded in 1793 as ‘The Edinburgh Asylum for the relief of the Indigent and Industrious Blind’, it had nine male trainees to whom it taught handicrafts as a means of gaining employment and actively supporting themselves. An educational unit provided rudimentary mental arithmetic and recitation of scripture lessons to complement this. Over the course of the 1800s, Royal Blind...
expanded its workshops which provided training to men producing mattresses, mats, brushes and baskets, and later, to women producing a wide range of knitted and sewn products. By 1880, product sales had reached the sum of £18,275 and many inmates had become highly skilled workers who could contribute substantially towards their own support. Towards the end of the century, in 1890, the Headmaster at West Craigmillar, Mr Illingworth, established a printing department at the school to provide pupils with an opportunity to apply what they had learnt in their lessons and establish a suitable career. It soon became a commercially successful braille production enterprise generating £32 of income in its first year.

Scottish War Blinded continued this tradition - providing rehabilitation, employability training and support, and employment in its workshops for veterans blinded in the First and Second World Wars. It described three main principles in its approach to the rehabilitation and training of the war blinded thus:

"In the first place, the war blinded man must learn to adapt himself to the conditions of the new world which he now finds himself in. In the second place, he must acquire once more, without the aid of vision, abilities and skills which previously depended largely on vision. In the third place, he must be enabled by the necessary training to take his place among his fellow workers."

8 Royal Blind 2016 A History of Braille and the Scottish Braille Press p.11
9 Scottish War Blinded Annual Report 1943
The Scottish Braille Press is still run by Royal Blind today and has become a leading provider of accessible formats for vision impaired people. Despite encountering financial difficulties at various points, the Press has for the most part steadily grown over the years, providing full-time jobs for nine blind men and women in 1899 and employing 23 workers in 1951, the majority of whom were registered blind. Demand for its services increased following implementation of the Disability Discrimination Act in 1995. In line with its historical aims, the Scottish Braille Press has two principal purposes: to enable written materials to be accessible to blind and partially sighted people, enabling their education, knowledge, empowerment and inclusion; and to provide employment for people with vision impairment. It continues to support the employment of blind and vision impaired people, in addition to people with other disabilities including mental health issues and people on the autism spectrum. As a supported employer, it aims for 50% of its workforce to be made up of people with a disability.

Employment rates amongst blind and partially sighted people are significantly lower than amongst the general population or other disabled people. In 2015 the RNIB estimated that around a quarter of registered blind and partially sighted people of working age were in paid or self-employment compared to around three quarters of the general population.

Ambitions and Aspirations

Where the focus historically was on preparing people for jobs deemed ‘suitable’ for blind people, today the emphasis is on supporting people to develop or regain their skills and resources for independent living, according to their particular needs and capabilities. Fred, who attended the Royal Blind School from 1952 to 1958, went on to become a university lecturer and an historian. He described his experience at the school thus: “what the Blind School did, to put it bluntly, was they produced blind people [in the 1950s]. People conformed to expectation of what blind people were.” Fred has written and spoken of the Headmaster’s limited ambitions for the pupils. Charles Anderson (Headteacher from 1932-1966) believed it was more pragmatic to train young blind people for vocational jobs according to their aptitude as they stood very little chance of gaining ‘professional’ jobs. “You were expected if you were a high flier of any kind to aim for physiotherapy or home teaching (social work as we would call it now). And that was that.”

Fred describes his time in the school during the 1950s as very prescriptive and regimented, where you had to be assertive in your voice and choice, and to go against the expectations of the time. Anderson made it clear to Fred that he thought it would be a waste of his time to go to university and assumed that Fred’s future wife, Etta should become a shorthand typist (though he gave way when she insisted on training as a physiotherapist). However, Fred had the benefit of his parents’ support and a rebellious streak which was honed attending Socialist Sunday School. He says: “I had always been led by my parents to expect that I would go to university and I just presumed that that was the case. And I wasn’t taking any nonsense.”

Under Anderson’s leadership however, there was a very narrow definition of the professions considered suited to blind people (including becoming a piano tuner, teacher or artisan). Fred describes his experience of feeling encouraged and supported to choose his own employment pathway: “when I was there, if you knew what you wanted to do when you left school, a lot of the teachers let you get on and do what you wanted to do.” Luke, and the majority of his 14 classmates, went onto further education and some went on to get jobs. He acknowledges, however, that these were not realistic aspirations for the increasing number of pupils with multiple disabilities who were coming to the school when he graduated in 2008. “If you didn’t have the full mental capacity there was nothing at the end of it. And I did feel heartily sorry for some of the clientele in there.”

William Stone (headteacher from 1904 to 1933) believed education was key to improving the position of blind people in society. In recognition of the barriers to employment for blind people, he also advocated for the state to provide an allowance for every blind person of working age in 1930[12]. Where Stone had also provided jobs for former pupils as home school teachers, Anderson believed that this was not in the school’s best interest. More recently, Luke describes his experience of feeling encouraged and supported to choose his own employment pathway: “when I was there, if you knew what you wanted to do when you left school, a lot of the teachers let you get on and do what you wanted to do.” Luke, and the majority of his 14 classmates, went onto further education and some went on to get jobs. He acknowledges, however, that these were not realistic aspirations for the increasing number of pupils with multiple disabilities who were coming to the school when he graduated in 2008. “If you didn’t have the full mental capacity there was nothing at the end of it. And I did feel heartily sorry for some of the clientele in there.”
Experiences of finding work and being supported in the workplace differed amongst those interviewed. One veteran who developed a vision impairment as an adult describes his experience of job searching.

“I’ve been signing on for six or seven years, and not only have they failed to offer me a job, they’ve failed to advise me of any jobs they think I could do safely with this condition, but I’ve still got to go and sign on.”

He describes a constantly shifting political landscape and the disempowering effect of being caught in a no-man’s land – being neither able to work, nor entitled to claim disability benefits.

“It devalues me. It feels like we’ve changed from a democracy into a dictatorship. We say that you can’t work now, and for the next six years or whatever you sit and vegetate. Right, someone else is in power now – we say you can work now and you’ve to sign on and look for a job […] You do as people bloody tell ya.”

Another interviewee suggested that the current political discourse around tackling a “benefits culture” was fuelling negative attitudes towards blind people and other disabled people. The disability benefits landscape continues to shift. The UK Government has announced that when the Work Choice employment programme ends in March 2019, ongoing support will be offered to individuals working in supported businesses like the Scottish Braille Press through specially designed new elements of the Government’s Access to Work scheme. For two years from April 2019, supported businesses will receive increased funding of £5,000 a year from Access to Work for each individual in a Work Choice Protected Place. However, it is unclear what support will be available to these employees after April 2021.
Another interviewee living in England felt his experience of navigating the benefits system had been largely positive. Luke, who went on to university after attending the Royal Blind School from 2001, felt that the financial benefits he’d received (such as Personal Independence Payments and Access to Work) facilitated him in getting a job, and being able to sustain his employment as a social worker. In particular, the financial support he received allowed him to pay for taxis to work, and also for a cleaner. Both these things make his life and his ability to work easier. Adaptations to the workplace were also considered important, such as magnifiers or specialist computer programmes. Perhaps even more importantly, however, was a feeling of being supported and knowing you could ask for help in the workplace if necessary. “I know I can ask for help if need be, I just try and be as independent as possible.”

A staff member at the Scottish Braille Press expressed the view that being a supported employer means more than just matching people to roles and adapting the physical environment, but also creating a supportive culture in the organisation. At the Scottish Braille Press, this has meant, for example, supporting employees in their personal lives (for example in accessing accommodation) and sometimes “just providing a shoulder to cry on” (staff, Royal Blind). While some specialist roles (such as those occupied by braille proof readers at the Scottish Braille Press) are by their nature particularly suited to vision impaired people, a view was expressed that there needed to be a greater recognition of the extra time and effort required of a vision impaired person to do the same job as a fully sighted person. “What we fail to recognise (when making adaptations for vision impaired people in the workplace) is that it’s still harder to do the job.” Outwith the Braille Press, Ken spoke of the risk of exhaustion and burn out, estimating that it can take approximately 40% longer to do the same job as a sighted person. Personally, he had felt very supported...
by his employer (he stayed on in the same job after going blind), yet felt he had to work much longer hours than his sighted peers to get the job done, and estimates he worked the equivalent of 20 years in just 22. As a consequence, Ken embraced the opportunity to take medical retirement when it was offered to him in his forties. He points out: “While blind people have the right to work and the opportunity to work and we need to do everything to enable that, we need to enable them to stop as well.”

The need to augment blind workers’ salaries to compensate for their lower productivity was recognised in Royal Blind’s commercial workshops from early on. The 1955 Handbook says, “The one great difference between the blind and sighted worker is the lower productivity of the blind person per man hour - due of course, entirely to his disability.”[13] Some of those interviewed played active roles as volunteers on boards and committees within organisations aimed at improving the welfare of blind and partially sighted people. This experience was felt to be valuable for three reasons: to influence decision making and service planning; to advocate on behalf of others; and to develop confidence. It was, however, suggested that progress in involving people with sight loss in decision making positions within blind organisations was slow.

This section briefly outlines the historical development of the Royal Blind School since its establishment in 1875. It then discusses how the Royal Blind School’s approach to providing education has changed and adapted to shifts in social attitudes towards the ‘inclusion’ of blind and partially sighted children and young people. This is based on the experiences of a small number of both current and former pupils, staff, and on secondary data which offers an insight into the school’s approach before the 1950s.

Royal Blind began educating children in 1875 when its educational unit amalgamated with the School for Blind Children and became the Royal Blind Playlam and School. The School for Blind Children had been set up by James Gall, a local printer and publisher specialising in religious works, in 1835. 14 The newly amalgamated school officially opened its premises at Craigmillar Park, Edinburgh on 22 May 1876. Thirty-four children attended the privately run residential school at Craigmillar Park and were taught to memorise considerable portions of the Bible alongside lessons in arithmetic, braille printing, English, geography, history and recitation. Older children were provided with additional tuition in organ and piano playing.

Amalgamation of the two schools followed soon after the implementation of the Education Scotland Act in 1872 which established the first national system of state education in Scotland. Although the Act did not intend to include disabled children, there are records of blind children attending mainstream classes. Compulsory education was only legally extended for blind and deaf children in 1893 and special schools were established to provide this. 15 Florian has argued that special schools were
premised on the notion of “different kinds of provision for different types of children”[16] rather than on providing equal opportunities for children with vision impairment or other disabilities.

The Royal Blind Asylum and School remained largely consistent in its primary purpose of providing education and life skills within the limits of what was deemed appropriate to enable young people to be self-supporting throughout the nineteenth century and much of the twentieth century. Young people were prepared for vocational jobs either in the Royal Blind workshops and Press, or in professional occupations deemed attainable for blind people. In 1937, Headmaster Charles Anderson put it that:

“Every child, so far as is possible, receives the education and training which seems best suited to his needs; those whose bent is practical spend more time on such handicrafts as basket-making or machine knitting, while those who can benefit by a more cultural education enter on a curriculum of secondary type.”

[16] Ibid.

Anderson goes on to make explicit his views that, while a further education may lead to professional training, his aspirations for the blind to occupy professional roles is limited to massage, music, teaching and physiotherapy. He concludes: “the educated craftsman with interests outside the daily task is a happier member of the blind community than the disillusioned professional worker.”[17]
Presumption of Mainstreaming

Over the years, the Royal Blind School has seen a gradual decline in numbers of pupils overall, but an increasing complexity in additional needs beyond a vision impairment. Overall numbers have dropped from 119 in 2006 to 29 pupils in 2018. This fall in numbers runs in parallel to the implementation of government policy which has promoted the inclusion of disabled children in mainstream schools (‘mainstreaming’). Correspondingly, the most recent census figures show the numbers of vision impaired pupils in mainstream schools in Scotland doubled between 2010 and 2018, from 2,005 to 4,175.[18]

Whilst pupils with no additional needs still attend successfully, the school has adapted its services accordingly to cater, increasingly, for the more complex end of need. First setting up a separate facility in 1953 providing education to vision impaired children with serious additional disabilities. Until then, the majority of vision impaired pupils at the school were otherwise healthy and physically able. The Education Acts of 1944 and 1945 began a legacy for mainstreaming as a backlash against what was viewed as the ‘segregation’ of pupils with additional support needs into ‘special’ schools.[19] This legacy is borne out today in the policy of ‘presumption of mainstreaming’ which Florian suggests has its roots in a rights based, anti-discrimination agenda of including children with disabilities into mainstream school and promoting social acceptance of vision impaired children into mainstream society.[20] In 1977, the Department of Education and Science put it thus:

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19 Taken from Florian, L 2018 On the presumption of mainstreaming: ideals and reality. Moray House School of Education Public Lecture, The University of Edinburgh 16/1/18 Unpublished.
20 Ibid
It is generally agreed that if a handicapped child can manage successfully in ordinary school he should go there; some now take the view that if handicapped children are to live within the normal community they should not be “segregated” for their education in special schools but should be educated alongside other children in ordinary schools.”[21]


Today, the Royal Blind School is Scotland’s only residential school specialising in the care and education of vision impaired children and young people from 4-19 years old, including those with complex needs. The school offers a full curriculum as well as teaching mobility and independent living skills. Class sizes are very small – approximately four per class – and many pupils are taught one-to-one for particular subjects when needed. The school tailors the curriculum for every pupil across the entire range of needs and aims to be “flexible in response to each individual pupil’s capabilities.”[22]

In recent years a number of organisations representing and working with disabled people have raised concerns about the operation of the “presumption of mainstreaming” and raised questions over whether this has resulted in real inclusion for a number of disabled pupils. In their report “IncludEd in the Main” Enable Scotland highlighted their research which showed that 60% of pupils who have learning disabilities feel lonely at school. Some pupils at the Royal Blind School spoke of how they had felt excluded in mainstream school because they were identified as different from their classmates. They also felt excluded from many of the ‘normal’ daily activities in school because of their vision impairment. Conversely, they felt a much greater sense of belonging and acceptance when they came to the Royal Blind School.

There was a recognition amongst staff at the Royal Blind School that, more often than not, teachers in mainstream schools had an almost “impossible job” and were frequently not being properly resourced to be able to meet the needs of vision impaired young people, or young people with other additional support needs. Staff and pupils spoke of how in many mainstream schools a lack of specialist skills and resources to support vision impaired children meant they were at times excluded from areas of daily school life, and from interacting with their classmates. Examples were given of children who had been unable to go into the playground at break times, had to sit in the corridor during class-time or who were only able to eat their lunch in the staff room while attending mainstream school.

“Social isolation in mainstream school is huge, it is huge. Whereas at the Royal Blind School they may not have children exactly the same age as them, they do have a peer group because they have children who understand them. You know they have people who want to talk to them. The
Lewis, aged 18, came to the Royal Blind School in 2017 after going to mainstream school for 13 years to learn independent living skills to enable him to get ready for university. He feels that his year at the Royal Blind School has helped him to make friends and overcome the isolation he felt while at mainstream school. He also feels he’s grown in confidence and gained essential life skills (for example, overcoming his fear of knives in order that he could learn to cook). He says:

“There’s just a lot more I can do, and I’ve got more friends now. I really had virtually no friends when I got to secondary school. And a lot of folk referred to me as ‘Lewis the blind student’ and all this. It really annoyed me. But here I’ve met more friends and there’s a lot more support if you need it. […] I’ve gone from being kinda down in the doldrums with no friends to being, getting really well prepared for university. Although I’m still nervous, I think I could do it more now. […] I feel as if the confidence is going up. I just felt completely gone at one point.”

The suggestion was that inclusion was understood as being treated the same as everyone else, where in fact the principle was about equality of opportunity. In the words of one residential worker “it’s about getting the same chance as everybody else of getting an education.”

One member of staff suggested this sense of isolation gets worse as children get older because young people themselves don’t want to be identified as different, but yet they need additional support. Their ‘otherness’ is further exacerbated as social skills become increasingly subtle and the gap in perceptions between a vision impaired young person and their sighted peers often widens. There was a fear that the policy of mainstreaming meant that too many children were missing out on support from specialist habilitation workers to learn essential life skills, and that this was compounding a sense of isolation and low self-esteem. Some felt that the policy of mainstreaming had failed some pupils in this regard, and one member of staff anticipated that more vision impaired children were likely to be referred to the Royal Blind School once it was recognised that they lacked essential skills to lead an independent life. The role of families in advocating that their child attended mainstream school was also recognised. It was suggested that this was sometimes because “families are in a grieving process and want to normalise [the experience of school for their child].” It was suggested that the relative advantages of sending their child to a special school might be realized only at a later stage, when they may be struggling to integrate into a mainstream school.
Andrew came from mainstream school aged 11 and says:  

“I definitely feel more independent and I feel like really included and not just a weird kid in the class […] but a bit more part of things. Like I’m being myself and more confident and like actually enjoying learning.”

Participating in clubs was also raised as a key facilitator to building confidence and social connections. Pupils at the school attended clubs including drama, band, scouts, judo, choir and swimming. Jim attended scouts during his time at the Royal Blind School and has since gone on to chair the Scout Committee and has, over the years, made many friends through this association.

A number of interviewees felt that blind people were less hidden away than they used to be in the past. Descriptions from the 1800s suggest that for many pupils who started at the Royal Blind School, this was their first opportunity to be amongst other children, and that they had been very much housebound until then. As Thomas Anderson observed of a fourteen-year-old girl who started at the Royal Blind School under his headship in the late 1800s:

“She had tasted the happiness of being associated with companions under similar circumstances, all of them delighted at the new powers they found themselves possessed of; they felt they were much nearer to the great mass of those around them than they had imagined.”

23 Anderson 1895 Observations on the Employment, Education and Habits of the Blind
“Habilitation is about taking vision impaired people out and explaining how the world works [...] our argument always is that without the whole life skills, understanding how the world works and how to get from A to B, and how to self-advocate, your qualifications are meaningless.” Staff, Royal Blind School.

Echoing this sentiment, WH Illingworth (headmaster of the Royal Blind School from 1885-1904) writes “[e]ducation of the blind absolutely fails in its object in so far as it fails to develop the remaining faculties to compensate for the want of sight.”[24] In the 1879 Royal Blind annual report, it is similarly stated “The education of the blind is, in the very nature of the case, more tedious and expensive than that of the sighted. [...] A vast amount of information enters through the eyes of sighted children as they pass along to school, and objects present themselves provocative of enquiry, from which the blind child is entirely shut out.”[25]

The Royal Blind School continues a long tradition of offering life skills support and mobility training to encourage independence for their pupils, seeing these skills as essential for independent living, confidence and employability as adults. Royal Blind also offers specialist support and training to teachers in mainstream schools through its Learning Hub. Support for children to develop life skills has developed over the years and become more specialised. While vision impaired pupils in mainstream schools may also

Mobility and Life Skills

24 Illingworth, WH History of the Education of the Blind 1910 p.3
25 Royal Blind Asylum Annual Report 1879 p. vi
was feeling I was just getting a bit isolated.”

For some, the skills they have learned at the Royal Blind School have also served to build their confidence in their parents and families to offer them more independence at home. 

“[Before I attended the Royal Blind School] my mother... was more afraid of the unknown but now she tells me ‘you’re old enough to make your own mistakes.’” (Luke)
The section on education looked briefly at the experiences of young people being supported to gain independence at the Royal Blind School. This section looks at the experiences of adults and older people being supported to gain or regain their independence across Royal Blind and Scottish War Blinded’s services. Scottish War Blinded offers rehabilitation and training to adapt to sight loss, as part of the outreach and services offered through their two centres for veterans: The Linburn Centre in West Lothian, and the recently opened Hawkhead Centre in Paisley. In recognition of changing needs, Scottish War Blinded has, over the years, widened its reach to include service veterans who lost their sight subsequent to their service. Scottish War Blinded first offered services to veterans whose sight loss was unrelated to their military service in 2007. Many of the veterans currently benefiting from Scottish War Blinded’s services have become vision impaired as a result of age related sight loss, such as macular degeneration. Therefore, the focus is on learning how to regain independence rather than on gaining it for the first time. Given the older demographic of most members, the services are no longer targeted towards employability and instead focus more broadly on promoting independence and combating social isolation.

Royal Blind originally founded Scottish War Blinded in 1915 to support the increasing numbers of servicemen returning to Scotland from World War One with life changing vision impairments. As discussed in the employment section, Newington House was set up to offer a programme of rehabilitation and training, with the aim of establishing a strong foundation towards employability and

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27 For more information, see the Scottish War Blinded publication 2018 A Century of Expanding Horizons: A celebration of Scottish War Blinded’s first hundred years.
independence. Members learned to read and write in braille, to navigate home and public environments as well as receiving training in basket and mat production, boot and shoe repairing, poultry farming and piano tuning. When they left Newington House, a £150 grant was provided to support the setting up of businesses, purchasing of equipment or accommodation assisted by the charity’s after-care workers.

In 1943 Scottish War Blinded acquired Linburn House in Wilkieston, West Lothian, to support blinded servicemen and women returning to Scotland from World War Two. Built upon the successes of Newington House, members received a year’s induction course learning to read and write in braille, touch-typing and basket making before choosing a range of training and employment opportunities in woodwork, cane, metal, wire and leather workshops as well as in outside employment as physiotherapists, typists and shop keepers with additional support from the charity’s after-care workers.

In the 1950s, Linburn House became the Linburn Workshops. Within ten years, Linburn House was replaced with a modern complex of rehabilitation rooms, workshops, recreation hall, homes, hostelry and a bowling green. A strong industrial emphasis developed, based on the principles of graft, community and camaraderie, where a wide range of products were developed and produced for the public and industry for over 50 years.

In 2011 Scottish War Blinded’s Linburn Centre replaced the Linburn Workshops. The centre accommodates up to 35 members a day who can attend for a range of activities, rehabilitation, independent living skills and social outings. The organisation also launched an outreach service for veterans with sight loss. The service has outreach workers across Scotland providing a one-stop contact point for dealing with statutory and voluntary agencies, specialist equipment provision, mobility and independent living support and introducing social opportunities. In 2017 Scottish War Blinded opened the Hawkhead Centre. This facility in Paisley, like the Linburn Centre, is an activity hub for veterans with sight loss, irrespective of cause.
Tackling Social Isolation

“By the very nature of vision impairment for some people it prevents them from coming out into the community and finding out information and from accessing help so there are a lot of hidden people that are not accessing services.” (Staff, Scottish War Blinded)

Recent research amongst service users of Royal Blind and Scottish War Blinded showed that almost two thirds of respondents felt that their sight loss had contributed to feelings of loneliness. The top three causes identified in the survey were problems with mobility and accessing transport; health problems and vision impairment making it hard to make friends. Outreach workers employed by Scottish War Blinded aim to access veterans who are at risk of social isolation, offering tailored advice and support, and potentially also linking them into local social activities and groups or into activities at the Linburn and Hawkhead Centres. In the words of one outreach worker, they try to access “hidden” people who are perhaps already in a “spiral of decline.” Finding and connecting to people who have lost confidence as a result of their vision loss can be a challenge in itself. As the outreach worker says:

“Some of the people we meet are in quite a bad way. They have been struggling for so many years. They’ve struggled on and they’ve reduced what they’re doing so much that they’re totally housebound now. And that’s purely because of their vision, because they’re fairly able bodied still […] they’ve withdrawn from life so much that they’re actually quite disabled by their vision loss.” (Outreach Worker, Scottish War Blinded)

Once they are able to connect to veterans with vision loss, outreach workers can help them regain skills through the provision of specialist vision impairment equipment, adaptations to their home, and through training. Staff also run local lunch clubs to bring people together and encourage social connections. “If we can get them to the centre as well, that’s just the icing on the cake.”

“IT’s isolating at times. You sit on the sidelines kindae style. But you get used tae it. You’ve gotta git used tae it. […] I can’t participate because I can’t see properly. It’s as simple as that.” (Hawkhead Men’s Focus Group)

“I don’t go to people’s houses, I isolate myself. The problem’s mine, not anybody else’s. They get on, I can see tae myself […] let the young ones get on with it.” (Hawkhead Women’s Focus Group)

“It [losing your sight] does change your life entirely.”

Royal Blind and Scottish War Blinded 2018 Loneliness and Social Connections Available to download at https://www.royalblind.org/campaigns/loneliness
One member at the Hawkhead Centre described a long period of isolation and loneliness following his loss of sight and described his struggle to find the appropriate services until an outreach worker from Scottish War Blinded connected with him. Another member explained how she “kept chappin’ doors” until she found one that opened.

Similarly to some of the young people at the Royal Blind School, members spoke about the value of feeling they belonged to a peer group at the Hawkhead Centre, particularly the men, who expressed a feeling of being amongst people who shared a background as fellow veterans, as well as their experience of vision loss.

This was despite the fact that people may have come from very different backgrounds and ages. As one man said:

“Since I came here, right, I’m in amongst men that are the same as me, and now, the age difference went oot the windae [...] yer back amongst all the vets [...] It’s the same here wi the boys, ye talk to each other.”

(Hawkhead Men’s Focus Group)

Staff at the centre placed emphasis on creating a friendly and informal environment, in which members are encouraged to feel they are treated as:

“people first and foremost, rather than being identified by their vision impairment.”

Both staff and members felt this encouraged strong social connections to be made in the centre.
There was a recognition that those who put themselves forward more and were prepared to speak out were more likely to get on in life, but that this was a hard lesson for those who were not used to speaking out. Fred refers to these people as the “blind elite” defining them as “exceptional people who have those characteristics of endurance and fight and not to take no for an answer. They will make their way through those difficulties and they will get there.” This resonates with other interviewees who talked about overcoming “hills to climb” and “fighting the fights.”

In particular, many people described a learning curve about when it was appropriate to act as independently as possible, and when to speak out and ask for help. One person suggested “it’s easier to ask for help for someone else than it is for yourself.” Ken described how it can feel like a constant journey of accepting and adapting to sight loss for people who have degenerative eye conditions or lose their sight later in life.

“Sight loss is like a bereavement. It’s a grieving process that has to be gone through. If you’re constantly being reminded of that bereavement because you’re constantly having to change, then you’re constantly living with that grief.”

In 2016, Ken cycled 750 miles across the length of the UK to raise money for RNIB. He teamed up with people who would act as pilots for him on each stage of his journey. This required him to put his trust in other people to guide him safely, which he felt was symbolic of the trust that blind and partially sighted people have to put in others every day. Learning to ask for help, he said, “becomes easier when you accept your condition.” This journey of learning to adapt to sight loss was described as a challenge not just for the person directly experiencing sight loss, but also for family and friends around them, who also have to learn to adapt and know when and how best to offer support, and when not to. This, in itself can sometimes put a strain on existing relationships.

Many people described their reluctance to accept a greater level of dependence, or even to identify themselves as vision impaired in public; some preferred not to use a symbol cane for this reason. For most, this was due to a strong desire to be perceived to be independent.

“People struggle to take up a symbol cane, because it’s an admission of becoming more dependent. But once you have this visible symbol you are actually freed up to be much more independent and make your way outside.” (Ken)

“Tell you the truth, I’m not so fussed on using it [the cane]. I don’t like to show the ‘blind card’ as it were. I try to remain as independent as possible.” (Ken)

“People tend to make a fuss of yer, I find. I just like to be tret like any other persons. […] If I need help, I’ll ask fer it. I have no problems asking for help.”

“Tell me the truth, I’m not so fussed on using it [the cane]. I don’t like to show the ‘blind card’ as it were. I try to remain as independent as possible.” (Luke)

“Tell you the truth, I’m not so fussed on using it [the cane]. I don’t like to show the ‘blind card’ as it were. I try to remain as independent as possible.” (Hawkhead Men’s Focus Group)

However, others described how they quickly learned that “If you didn’t ask for help, you didn’t get it.” Fred, for example, arrived at university in the late 1950s, and found that universities had libraries and with no support to read the course books when he did eventually find it. Through sheer desperation he expressed his anxiety about how he could get through the reading and a fellow student “took me under his wing.” Buoyed up by that, Fred went and asked at local Christian Church about readers. Within a week a man had gathered a team of 12 readers to read to him. Fred later concluded that other vision impaired people hadn’t told him about their own use of readers because...
“they felt psychologically that they had to appear as independent as possible. So, they’d almost done it all by themselves. They didn’t want to talk about the help that they’d had. That was the crucial difference for me. I realised that it was extremely damaging for blind people to have that psychology. That we absolutely had to talk about our needs. That took me into campaigning [...] later on.”

How people perceived themselves and wanted to be perceived was linked to perceptions of dependence and independence. For example, Luke was comfortable to be labelled as disabled, accepting that this allowed him certain benefits which supported him to work. He was not, however, comfortable to be labelled as a vulnerable adult. Despite being classified as such in the eyes of the law, he did not see himself as vulnerable. In contrast, Hutchison has written about how some blind people in Edwardian Edinburgh were identified as disabled and others as able-bodied. Those who were classified as able-bodied were afforded the opportunity to work for the blind asylum (although this had the disadvantage of giving up other freedoms). For the most part, interviewees’ experiences had been that people were willing to help when asked. In fact, most people attributed examples of situations where they had either experienced negative attitudes or accidents (e.g., falling down a manhole in the street or tripping over works in the pavement) to a lack of awareness or knowledge. However, one person was taken aback by the backlash of negative opinion he had received after posting a picture of a van parked on a pavement (which he had bumped into). He attributed this to a current negative discourse against disabled people as a result of political measures to tackle the so-called “benefits culture”. Others had encountered an attitude that they may be “cheating the system” (one example given was of someone with dark glasses and a guide dog reading the newspaper). Interestingly, Jim explained that, despite also being very independent, he always accepts help when it is offered regardless of whether he needs it. The reason for this is that he places great value on politeness and his experience has been that members of the public may perceive it as impolite to decline their help. He felt it important to be polite so that person would be encouraged to offer their help to another vision-impaired person who may need it more than him.
Many people spoke about the importance of support they had received from their family, either growing up or in later life. While some vision impaired people’s experience of growing up was that their parents were very protective of them, others felt their parents had fostered their independence and resilience. In Jim’s words: “my dad always said, ‘I’m not going to wrap you in cotton wool […] but I'll do anything to help you.’” Fred felt that his particular background and circumstances meant that he “never felt excluded on account of my blindness. […] I came from a rebel culture and that stood me in good stead.”

People also spoke of the support of other family members, including their siblings who, for many, were instrumental in connecting them to friends and social activities. One woman who lost her sight later in life said “I’ve got three sisters, they wouldn’ae do anything without me” where another person spoke of how their siblings transported them to events. For older people, their children often supported them but there was also a feeling expressed by some of not wanting to rely on others too much and an appreciation that transport to the Hawkhead Centre was provided. Being able to travel independently was also highly valued, as was the free travel pass which doubled up as a signifier to the bus driver that you were vision impaired. For one person becoming a parent after losing his sight was “like seeing the world again through someone else’s eyes”, whereas for someone else becoming a parent with sight loss heightened a sense of being unable to participate fully. He says, “I was kind of excluded from normal parenting tasks.”

Organisations supporting vision impaired people, including Royal Blind and Scottish War Blinded, were cited as having a big impact on many people’s sense of connectedness and in helping to remove barriers to participation. Common feedback about the staff and environment at Royal Blind and Scottish War Blinded was how much at home they made people feel. “Overall this [the Hawkhead Centre] has been the best thing, at my age, that’s happened to me. They just look after ye.”
Technology and Accessible Media

Technological advances and accessible media have undoubtedly played a large part in making accessible areas of life that people with sight loss were previously excluded from, particularly reading. From its early beginnings, Royal Blind has played an instrumental role in introducing an alternate reading and writing system for blind people and in making this accessible through printing texts in braille. The Royal Blind School began teaching reading and writing in braille and braille printing from 1875 (when the Royal Blind Asylum amalgamated with the School for Blind Children). The Scottish Braille Press was born in 1890 when Mr. Illingworth (Headmaster from 1885-1904) established a printing department at the school. In 1893 the Printing Department published the inaugural copy of ‘Hora Jacunda’, a monthly magazine which Illingworth produced and edited. Hora Jacunda provided a forum for many blind and partially sighted people to have their say on braille, embossed Roman alphabets and the language systems. Illingworth was a strong advocate of establishing one uniform system of reading and writing for the blind, and subsequently founded a union in connection with Hora Jacunda to push this agenda forward.

Perhaps ahead of its time, this union was founded on a recognition that those most qualified to determine the preferred system of reading and writing for the blind should be the blind themselves.

“Amongst the more intelligent of the blind the opinion has long been gaining ground that, for any good result to be obtained, the question [over which system should be favoured] must not be settled for the blind, but by the blind themselves.”

30 Illingworth WH 1910 History of the Education of the Blind p19
Illingworth was invited to join the National Uniformed Braille Committee after presenting an influential paper in 1902 and played an instrumental role in fully revising the braille system in 1905. Illingworth also strongly advocated for the braille system to be taught in blind schools and challenged the argument that the system of reading and writing for blind people should use the same Roman type characters as the system for the sighted, for fear of increasing their isolation from mainstream society by adopting a different system.

“A man is isolated by everything which renders the acquisition of knowledge difficult and tedious, and his isolation is diminished by everything which facilitates his power of self-education. The best type for him to use is evidently that which he can read most fluently and correctly.”[31]

Braille continues to be taught today to some pupils in the Royal Blind School. Technological advances mean that pupils also now have the opportunity to use equipment such as the BrailleNote (a computer for vision impaired people) and Perkins Brailler (a braille typewriter). Teaching materials are also adapted to large print and audio and used alongside a range of other formats to facilitate teaching and learning. The remainder of this section turns its attention to the impact of technology and alternative formats on the inclusion of blind and partially sighted people supported by Royal Blind, in their own words.

31 Ibid.
Preferences for particular formats and equipment varied according to a range of factors including people’s particular eye condition, experience, age and personal preference. However, the three general areas where interviewees felt that accessible formats and technological advances had made the biggest impact on their lives were reading and writing skills, mobility and life skills, and connecting with others. These are expanded on below.
Many of those who had lost their sight spoke of the grief of no longer being able to read and the impact of that in all areas of their lives. Where the Royal Blind School historically taught braille to all pupils, now different forms of communication are taught according to what suits the individual child's needs best. For some interviewees such as Jim, braille has been a lifelong passion, both in his personal life and in his job as a braille transcriber at the Scottish Braille Press. “Goodness knows what I would do without braille. I love my braille!”

In the late 1950s and early 60s, before much literature was available in alternative formats, Fred had to be innovative in finding people to read to him in order to be able to study at university (as discussed earlier). Luke is partially sighted due to a degenerative condition and was attending university in the early 2000s. He was more fortunate both in being able to access technology and in attending a university where they had experience of adapting their teaching to the needs of a vision impaired person. However, Luke has additional learning difficulties and this made it harder for him to read. Unlike many of the texts were not in the right formats for him. In contrast, Fred who had no-one assigned to help him at university. Luke had a support worker with him in all his classes who helped him with reading, note taking and research. His Disabled Students Allowance covered the cost of this additional support and equipment to help him such as a laptop and voice recorder.

In addition to reading as an essential part of work, study and getting around, many of those interviewed had enjoyed reading for pleasure. Having lost his sight before becoming a father, Ken never got to read to his daughter and felt they missed out on a crucial bonding experience as a result.

The availability of computers and assistive technology has made a huge change to the lives of vision impaired people. Whereas previously accessible formats were limited to large print,
audio and braille, now written materials can be converted directly to electronic format. Scottish War Blinded provides financial support to its members to enable them to take electronic equipment home as well as providing support and training to use the equipment. Equipment includes synaptic tablets (portable computers with software accessible for people with vision impairment). Scottish War Blinded’s Hawkhead Centre found the software made it so much easier for its members to use computers, and the fact that they’re portable means members can stay connected outside of their own homes.

“Primarily all of the members have got their own tablets and they’re completely engaged in this learning process that they’re getting from all of us here at the centre.”

Similarly, the smartphone (and audio developments on smartphones in particular) was considered a huge advancement as it enabled people with sight loss to talk to their phones and have their phones talk to them. The fact that this was mainstream technology accessible to blind people, rather than specialist technology, was considered an added bonus by Ken:

“It’s [the smartphone] made a huge change in everybody’s life, but we’re included in that. And in a way it’s the inclusion in that that makes it so special, rather than some specialist kit.”

Describing how technology has advanced access to literature for vision impaired people, a member of staff describes:

“Back in the day if you wanted a newspaper you’d have to wait for a cassette to come in the post which would maybe take two days whereas now you can just pick a tablet and get it instantly in a podcast.”

Many of Scottish War Blinded’s older members had little or no experience of using smartphones or tablets before they lost their sight and were learning to use them for the first time.
Where traditionally use of the cane and guide dogs were the principal aids to mobility for blind and partially sighted people, today there are apps that help them navigate their way around, tell them when the bus is coming or where to get off. People spoke of the usefulness of these apps, particularly those that describe not just where to go, but that use the phone’s camera to describe the environment around you including shops and junctions. Apps for transport such as bus tracker were also found to be useful, as were card readers which verbalise bus tracker information. On the other hand, the number of sighted people who walk along looking at their mobile phones in the street can sometimes pose a hazard for blind and partially sighted people.

Preferences for different mobility aids were partly dependent on age and experience. For example, Jim (blind since birth) was trained in using the long cane and braille at the Royal Blind School and had also been used to having a guide dog. He says of the guide dog “it’s the best way to get from A to B because the streets are so much more cluttered than when I trained with the long cane.” Some of those who lost sight gradually or in a later stage of life were more reluctant to use either a symbol or long cane for reasons discussed earlier. One member of staff suggested that once people tried out a piece of kit that was less of a visible signifier of vision loss, (for example, a Bluetooth device that clips onto glasses and reads out the bus times at the bus stop or Sat Nav on your phone to help them to be orientated), they were sometimes more accepting of trying out more obvious kit, such as the cane.

Technology was also felt to have enabled vision impaired people to do much more for themselves in their homes, such as cooking. Members at Scottish War Blinded were offered solutions from the hi-tech, such as talking measuring jugs to low-tech solutions such as placing an elastic band around the salt to distinguish it from the pepper or using contrasting colours in the kitchen.

In the Royal Blind School, equipment such as a vibrating speaker used in music class; an interactive sensory room; sound beams and switch operated drums offer pupils who have multiple disabilities an opportunity to experience things for themselves, which they might otherwise be unable to do.
Connecting with Others

Being able to use voice recognition on smartphones or use Skype to call family overseas illustrates how accessible technology has enabled vision impaired people to connect more easily with family and friends. For those who had lost their sight due to age related conditions, as for those who were born blind, the support of others to access the technology and learn how to use it was crucial. This support came primarily from staff at Royal Blind and Scottish War Blinded. Staff at the Hawkhead Centre gave examples of helping a member to set up his PC who then skyped his family in Australia for the first time, and of someone phoning a friend just to say, “I’m calling you from the IT centre.” They spoke of taking people from the stage of not knowing how to use a mouse, to listening to Frank Sinatra on the iPad, and the confidence that being able to do these things gave their members.

“All of a sudden I’m quite good at it now.” “Now I’m on WhatsApp, and I’ve got email an all that.”

“It’s been the best job. I’ve been the one to give them this device or whatever and […] you see a change […] you see them they’re chirpier and feeling better.” (Staff Member, Hawkhead Centre)

People at the Hawkhead Centre also became aware of the equipment that was available to them and its benefits from talking to their peers. One member of staff recounted an instance where a younger member was chided by an older person for discounting technology and convinced him to engage with it. They also got support to use it from their families and friends.

“See all this modern stuff an that? If yer cannae use it, you get one of yer grandchildren, get one of them.” (Hawkhead Centre Member)
Care Services for Older People

Royal Blind currently has two care homes for older people: Braeside House and Jenny’s Well. Braeside House opened in 1999 as a purpose-built care home for vision impaired older people and is based in Liberton, Edinburgh. Jenny’s Well opened in October 2017 and is based in Paisley, next door to the Hawkhead Centre run by Scottish War Blinded. Jenny’s Well is another purpose-built care home providing nursing care to older people with vision impairment, including those that may have other medical needs such as dementia.

Royal Blind originally established residential care in 1825 to blind women, providing a safe environment to live and work for those who were either too frail or unable to care for themselves independently. The original facility at Hill Place welcomed an initial intake of 25 women from working age to elderly. These women were first housed in Craigmillar alongside the school, and subsequently moved to a purpose-built facility called the Thomas Burns Home in 1929. This provided residential rooms, workspaces and recreational areas, and those that weren’t too frail continued to produce sewing and knitted products. As many residents became elderly, a shift towards the provision of nursing care replaced many of the industrial activities that flourished at Craigmillar Park. As a result of greater demand for nursing provision, Oswald House was purchased in 1946 to provide an eventide home for increasing numbers of elderly and infirm women of all ages.

By the 1960’s demand for places exceeded capacity and the Board made the decision to extend the Thomas Burns Home to all residential nursing care would be provided within one location. The newly constructed Thomas Burns Home was opened by the Institution’s Patron, Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother in 1970. In its jubilee year of 1979, the Thomas Burns Home was further extended to welcome male residents. By 1988 the home catered exclusively for older people who required either residential or nursing
care. The accommodation at Thomas Burns was becoming archaic and plans were made to open a new home. Canaan Home in Morningside opened in 1991, accommodating 72 male and female residents in four houses. Changes in legislation resulted in Royal Blind’s residents becoming much frailer on admission and in need of nursing care rather than residential care. To meet their changing needs, the decision was made to move to another location and residents moved from Canaan Lane to Braeside House in 1999. Jenny’s Well care home, a second residential home in the west of Scotland, opened in Paisley in October 2012.

The two biggest changes in provision of care for older people since Royal Blind first started providing it, in 1825 (as described by staff and reflected in the Royal Blind’s archives) have been in who care is provided for, and how care is provided. The remainder of this section will address how Royal Blind’s Older People’s Services have adapted to the care needs of a changing demographic supported by their services. It will then look at how their approach to care has changed in that time.
Since its early beginnings, Royal Blind's care services have evolved and adapted to meet the needs of its clients. Where originally it provided residential care to women of all ages, some of whom were still able to work, now it specialises in providing nursing care to older men and women. The vast majority of residents at Braeside House and Jenny's Well have developed age-related sight conditions including: macular degeneration; glaucoma; diabetic retinopathy; cataracts; and stroke related visual impairment. Many of them have other age-related care needs such as dementia. This is compared to the majority of residents who were cared for at Thomas Burns Home, many of whom used to work in Royal Blind's industrial workshops, and/or attend the Royal Blind School. Staff at Braeside House, some of whom had been employed by Royal Blind as carers since the 1970s, described the impact of the changing demographic on the care services they had provided over the years. There has been a change in demographics at Braeside – residents in the early days were family to each other where residents at Braeside now have family support although some of their children are themselves elderly as people are living longer. A big change was in the background of the people they were caring for. Staff recounted how in the past a lot of the residents were with Royal Blind because they had been abandoned by their families and had become like family to one other “[E]veryone was more the family. A lot of them didn’t have a family, that had come from the school.” They had a shared background and history: many had attended the Royal Blind School together or had previously worked at Royal Blind’s industrial workshops, or at the Scottish Braille Press, and many of them had gone to church together: “You had a bulk of residents that were all sort of similar […] very little people came from outside with degenerative conditions.” The staff experienced a shift in care services after the move to Canaan Lane towards providing nursing care for older people with age related sight loss, who had had no prior involvement with Royal Blind. This shift also brought with it a need for the staff to adapt to...
meeting the needs of elderly residents with more complex care needs, but also to working with their families who regularly visited. The staff didn’t have the advantage of knowing the newer residents who came from outside of Royal Blind, as they had known the residents at Thomas Burns Home and had to learn how best to support them and their families. This was in contrast to most of the residents who came from the Royal Blind School and workshops, who were well known to the staff.

Aside from their vision impairment, many of the residents at the Thomas Burns Home were relatively able-bodied and able to participate in a number of activities and outings. Many of them were also fiercely independent and not afraid to express their needs.

“They were more sociable, they joined at everything. They did everything. Their physical [impairment] was their eyes, they got on with everything else.”

“They used to go to the workroom at Thomas Burns House and they would do sewing and knitting. But if they weren’t very good at it, we weren’t allowed to do anything […] so the likes of Molly […] would just sit there […] It made for very long days.” (Staff, Braeside House)

This was in contrast to the residents at Braeside House now who on average are much older when they arrive, with much more complex needs, often at the stage of needing end of life care. In the words of one member of staff:

“We are looking after people who probably three or four years ago would not have got out of NHS care because of the complexity of their needs.”

Another member of staff observed:

“[Residents] are coming in that very frail stage when they are very dependent.”
Person Centred Care

The staff from Braeside House described how they had experienced a shift from a highly structured and regimented approach to care, to a much more flexible approach, tailored to the individual’s care needs. They remembered how everything was timetabled and followed a rigid routine, down to what time residents got up, had their meals, and even when they were to go to the toilet! Comparing then and now, one staff member says: “We recognise the individual person and assess individual needs, where before it was highly structured and one size fits all.”

“My biggest bugbear was the mealtimes. You’d have a room with say 65 residents in it. And the noise was horrendous. […] You imagine being these people. Now, they now do protected mealtimes with 10, 12 residents. Dishwashers are not even allowed to go on. It’s definitely moved on.”

(Braeside Staff)

This was in stark contrast to the emphasis placed on respecting the residents’ right to exercise their freedom of choice now. The residents at Braeside House and Jenny’s Well have developed sight loss later in life, often after leading very active and independent lives. There was a strong recognition of the need to support them to express their opinions and choices as far as possible, and to respect these.

“Seeing the residents getting the choice. And I’ve seen them walking around not looking that sort of perfect. They’ve got their PJs on and their jacket on top. And nobody bats an eye. That’s just brilliant because that resident’s happy. […] Them getting that choice and looking more about what’s right for them rather
than what’s right for us, or what’s easy for us or their families.”

Supporting and challenging people to gain or regain their independence, as far as possible, was seen as part of the ethos of care across Royal Blind’s services.

“You train people to see what they can do not what they can’t do.” “Everything they do is for a reason. It’s our job to figure out what that reason is.”

Echoing the sentiment expressed in other services in the organisation, huge emphasis was placed on the need to get to know the residents well, to build trust and plan around their individual needs. Where care for older people was concerned, that meant making that person feel as settled and secure as possible. To this end, Braeside House is not a locked building because “As soon as you put a locked door in front of someone, they want to leave.”

In keeping with this institutional culture, there was also a very rigid hierarchy in Thomas Burns Home, and all decisions had to go through the ‘matron.’ Staff had to wear nurse’s uniforms and go by their surname at work, both with residents and other staff. The carers remembered how they were not even supposed to be seen by the doctors when they did their rounds in the residence.

“Things were quite rigid then and you were here to do a job. You were pretty much treated like a young girl. You did your job and you did as you were told. You didn’t really have an opinion, you didn’t voice an opinion [...] you weren’t listened to [...] but equally did a lovely job. They had their role that they were in charge and you were their helpers.”

Although the approach to care provision has clearly changed over the years, the ethos of caring seems largely to have remained similar, at least since the 1970s. Staff felt they were working in an environment where the fundamental focus was, and always had been, on using what they saw as all too often “the forgotten nursing” skills of simply caring for older people. This caring approach was seen to extend not only to the residents but to everyone involved in the organisation. Many staff shared stories of how they had felt particularly valued and supported by the organisation and attributed this to why they had continued to work for Royal Blind for so long.

“We all care within the organisation. Not just about the care of the residents, care of the staff, care of the families, care of anyone that comes in. It’s that really kind of supportive environment.”
Care for Young Adults

While Royal Blind has been providing care for older people since 1825, it only began providing residential care for young adults post school age in 2010. Forward Vision was set up by managers from the Royal Blind School in 2010, in response to finding that there was a lack of appropriate places for young adults with vision impairment and complex needs to go to when they left school. As a result, they were at times placed in care homes for older people. Forward Vision is a small, specialised service providing transitional residential care for adults with a vision impairment and additional disabilities. It caters to adults between the ages of 17-25 after finishing school and has 14 bedrooms. Short breaks for young disabled adults are also offered when space allows.

Allermuir was established in 2016 as an extension of the charity’s adult services, building upon the success of Forward Vision. It provides a home for life for four disabled adults of any age. There has been a general shift of the organisation towards educating and caring for people with much more complex needs than previously, largely in response to changes in policy and legislation, and an identified need to fill a gap in service provision. This section looks at the focus in Royal Blind’s care services for young adults on supporting them to lead fulfilling lives and describes a move towards promoting the integration of sighted and vision impaired young people as more of a two-way process. Although care services for young adults are a relatively recent development, many of the staff interviewed from Forward Vision compared their experiences to earlier roles looking after residential pupils from the Royal Blind School who lived at Craigmillar House.
"For most of our people the aim was to get them out and live independently as much as possible. Now because most of our young people have got such complex needs, it's more about caring and keeping them safe. The reality is they will not be able to get out and live independently. It's about helping them achieve their potential. But their potential will never be living independently, getting to university, getting a job. But it might be that they can go to a shop with support, they might be able to travel on a bus. For some, it's about keeping them as healthy and safe as possible. I think that's something we're good at now." (Staff focus group, Forward Vision).

While staff were realistic about the potential of the young people they cared for, they were also committed to challenging them to push the limits of their capabilities and extend their experiences. They had huge respect for the resilience of the young people and placed emphasis on their duty to offer them new opportunities and experiences they might not otherwise have, based on an in-depth understanding of each child's capabilities. For example, by encouraging a young person to engage in more vigorous play if the staff know that person actually likes rough and tumble, despite appearing fragile.

"The thing for me is you have so many staff here who've been here a long time, you've got that experience [...] they really know the young people really well, in depth [...] "we don't treat them with kid gloves, we treat them as human beings."

"The young people amaze me every day." The staff shared lots of stories about particular young people they had cared for in the past, and how they always exceeded expectations of what they were capable of:

"[young person's name] was totally blind, he had artificial legs, he could ride round the courtyard [...] on a bike, on the pavement [...] He used to jump up the stairs three at a time (using echolocation) "what you think they maybe couldn't [do] and then they blow you away.""

"[young person's name]. She had one leg. She actually went round the courtyard on a trike "When I met her she had tights on, and she threw her leg over her shoulder [...] the leg was getting in the way! "you have to learn about the child and watch them greatly [...] she was so fast."

Another reason cited for staff retention (many of the staff caring for young people had also worked at Royal Blind for over 30 years) was because the organisation is all about knowing the young people and meeting their individual needs. The staff enjoyed the challenge and variety of planning around their understanding of each person's needs, on any given day. Many spoke of how much they learned from one another and from the children.
Many of the staff had previously cared for children who attended the Royal Blind School and lived at Craigmillar and reminisced about looking after the children in the dormitories. Luke similarly says, “we were basically like one big family [residents and residential staff at Craigmillar]. It was fabulous, one of the best experiences I’ve ever had.” Although some missed the dormitory style accommodation at Craigmillar, the view was expressed that the ethos of providing a nurturing, safe and secure environment remained the same in their approach to looking after young adults. Staff also discussed the importance of educating young people in morals and values.

“Even though things have changed […] we still think of ourselves as a homely model […] it’s home from home. Giving cuddles, teaching boundaries, morals and values. Ideas about what makes a “good” person may have changed but the aim to “turn out” people who have a sound approach to the world. Particularly, being kind and accepting of others.” (Staff, Forward Vision).
The theme of educating young people at Royal Blind in being kind and accepting of others came through strongly in discussion with staff at Forward Vision. They spoke with great pride of a few particular young people who they had cared for and had shown great kindness towards their peers who were more disadvantaged than themselves. Staff discussed the huge range of social backgrounds, abilities and needs of young people who came to the school and lived in the residential houses, and of the benefit to the young people of experiencing this diversity.

"We had a very privileged rich boy who came quite spoilt and left one of the loveliest young men."

"[Young person’s name] didn’t realise people had such complex needs and now he interacts with people like [young person’s name] and it boosts his self-esteem."

"I’ve seen some young people who are quite typically developing, who have been amazing with the young people who have more profound disabilities [...], it makes you proud to think that’s the kind of young person that the school produces."

Royal Blind also runs Kidscene – an after-school and holiday club that caters for children with and without disabilities between the ages of 5-16. This has been referred to as a model of ‘reverse integration’. It could also be seen to offer a dynamic and two-way model of integration.32 It was suggested that by integrating young people of mixed abilities and backgrounds (including those who

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32 This comes from the European Council on Refugees and Exiles’ working definition of integration as “a process of change that is dynamic and two-way; it places demands on both receiving societies and the individuals and/or the communities concerned.” See ECRE 2002 The Position of the Integration of Refugees in Europe.
may be sighted, able-bodied, vision impaired or disabled), they are given an opportunity to develop a greater awareness and appreciation of one another’s needs.

Staff talked of how blind people were more hidden and isolated in the past, and of how they encourage the young people to be visible in the wider community and to “speak up for themselves.” They described an historical shift from a more paternalistic and pitying attitude towards “poor wee blind kids” to a more rights-based approach.

"Young people are more out in the community now. I worked with people in the early days who had just been put away almost. One wee girl in particular had just been isolated, on her own, and had like no input at all when she came to us.” (Staff, Forward Vision)

This publication has looked at how Royal Blind has approached the social inclusion of blind and partially sighted people over more than two centuries and has aimed to give a sense of how that change has been experienced by a small number of people who have been involved with Royal Blind. However, the aim has not been to either evaluate or judge the approach now, or then. In the words of another member of staff:

“'At the end of the day that was what was done then […] that’s important to kind of recognise. Who’s not going to say that people won’t be sitting around this table in a hundred years looking back at what we did and thinking “you did what?”’ (Staff, Forward Vision)."