



In Our Sights



**Reflections On The First Two Years Of The
Eye Matter Young People's Project As
Supported & Facilitated By The RNIB NI.**

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FOREWORD

Blindness and partial sight bring in their wake challenges, frustrations and struggles for each individual for whom these conditions are everyday realities. Put simply, some difficulties are an inherent part of the territory of seeing poorly, only dimly or not at all.

The extent to which such difficulties shape a person's experience of life, sense of self and degree of personal fulfilment is influenced by a great many factors. Amongst the pertinent variables in play are considerations such as whether the sight difficulty has been present since birth or came later as the result of injury or disease which influence amongst other things extent of acceptance, the nature of coping strategies and forms of assistance required.

Important too are childhood and adolescent experiences arising from the part of the parenting spectrum they were exposed to. Was their personal norm to be mollycoddled and over protected or encouraged subtly to take acceptable risks and mount each of the steps on the road to a confident independence?

Additionally, what can never sensibly be discounted are the person's inbuilt personality, temperament and character that account for the amount of determination they are able to deploy in the face of the everyday challenges they inevitably face as a blind or partially sighted person.

However, what is not inevitable are a range of societal responses to those with sight difficulties that mean that the circumstances of

young people who are blind or partially sighted in Northern Ireland and the nature of opportunities available to them are a scandal.

The fact that, thirty-five years after the UN International Year of Disabled People in 1981, and a decade on from the passing of the UK's Disability Discrimination Act of 1995, so many issues affecting the life experiences and life chances of young people here with sight problems that could be resolved have not been, points to a shameful lack of political will.

Against this backdrop *'In Our Sights'* will hopefully be at least as challenging to read as it has been to write.

The challenge of writing it has essentially been to keep it to a manageable length given how much Eye Matter members have to say and the nature of the issues arising from the period of their development as a group.

The methodology adopted owes more to journalism than to the evaluation techniques of social science. The contents of this report arise from an amalgamation of attending Eye Matter events and meetings over an eighteen month period to observe; listen to; converse with and interview members of the group with the twin objects of:-

- establishing a perspective on the impact on participating young people of their involvement in the project, and,
- determining what project members consider to be the major issues and concerns which arise in relation to their sight difficulties that lead to negative affects on their lives.

This activity was undertaken with a view to distil the findings into a report to be made available to those whose personal or professional responsibilities make the subject matter pertinent or of interest to them.

'In Our Sights' is the result, with the content divided as follows:-

- ❑ an **Introduction** which is offered by way of orientation for the reader in terms of what Eye Matter is, the objectives it has and the nature of the activities it has engaged in during its first developmental phase;
- ❑ **Profiles of Six Eye Matter Members** produced with a view to rise above 'reportspeak' to present a sense of the humanity of a cross section of participating young people, convey something of what involvement in Eye Matter has meant to them and enable them to articulate their thoughts on matters of importance to them. It is important to note that these are not transcripts of interviews but are rather composites of conversations and interviews ghost written by the author drawing on notes and recordings of encounters. Every effort has been made to remain true to the spirit and actuality of what they said;
- ❑ **Benefits & Impacts** is an attempt to briefly codify what the outcomes of Eye Matter have been in terms of the personal development of its core members;
- ❑ **Issues & Concerns** is an overview of matters that the membership of Eye Matter have over time indicated are those which most negatively impact on their quality of life, and which they intend as a group to address through lobbying and campaigning to bring about positive change.

The document is hopefully free of political correctness and the strangling effect on creative and constructive thought that accompanies it. Nor does it adopt a finger pointing stance aimed at spraying blame onto various professional groups. In short it is not a witch hunt for culprits – indifference and inaction are the only enemies here.

Whilst Eye Matter members have every reason to be angry a hallmark of the group's ethos is that they wish to channel that anger into making pragmatic demands rather than simply lashing out or merely moaning and complaining.

The challenge for those reading it is how to respond.

I would like to acknowledge the assistance of RNIB NI staff who were consistently helpful in making themselves available to provide information and their perspective on developments within Eye Matter. Particular thanks in this regard are due to Martin Walls and Martin O'Kane whilst Barry Macaulay has not only been a source of valuable insight but an inspiration because of his tireless work in supporting Eye Matter develop despite a wide range of competing demands on him. My gratitude is also due to the range of people from organisations which have worked with Eye Matter in one way or another and who have taken the time and trouble to share their thoughts, particularly Fergus Cooper, until recently the Northern Ireland Director of Children's Express. Finally and most importantly a heartfelt thanks to the young people in Eye Matter who tolerated my questions and put up with my skulking note taking presence.

Harry Reid

INTRODUCTION

Eye Matter is a group of young people with sight difficulties from across Northern Ireland. It is hosted, supported and facilitated in its activities by personnel from the RNIB NI, but critically, it is the group's members which make all decisions having considered advice and guidance from their hosts.

As of October 2005 Eye Matter comprises a core membership of twenty who regularly participate in the group's activities and decision making, and a wider network of some sixty members who because of their geographical position find more than intermittent participation difficult or whose level of commitment means they choose to dip in and out of activities and leave decision making to others of their peers.

The roots of the emergence of Eye Matter can be traced back three years to a conversation between a young woman with sight difficulties on work placement at the RNIB NI's Belfast office and a senior manager at the organisation. She wondered why at that time the agency focused its efforts on the needs of young children, middle aged and older people while adolescents and young adults essentially figured in RNIB NI's work only in relation to matters of formal education.

Already concerned about the barriers to participation in the formal and informal youth service, amounting to exclusion, faced by young people with sight difficulties the RNIB NI responded by consulting with young blind and partially sighted people as to what form of initiative they would most welcome. Ideas coalesced

around some sort of youth forum which was self programming but with non controlling support and assistance provided by the RNIB NI.

With an increasingly strong sense of what young people wanted the RNIB NI set about seeking financial support for the nascent idea of a youth forum made up of blind and partially sighted teenagers and young adults. This led to applying for, and securing funding from, the Youth Council of Northern Ireland who provided a two year grant for programme and support costs of £50,000 towards the end of 2003.

What was to become Eye Matter began its life as the RNIB NI Youth Forum, with the objective of providing an opportunity for young people with sight difficulties to find their voice, and have a platform from which to express it through a range of self programmed activities.

To seek to achieve this objective the Forum had a range of aims that can be summarised as follows-

- to provide constructive opportunities for socialisation, interaction and enjoyment;
- to create opportunities for meaningful personal development;
- through mutual exchanges to enable the identification of key issues on which to lobby, campaign and to gain access to the skills; insights; knowledge and understanding of the tools and techniques to campaign effectively; and,

- to foster the leadership potential of participating young people so that over time the Forum would become increasingly self reliant and progressively less dependant on the support of the RNIB NI.

Recognising that efforts were being started from scratch, at the outset the RNIB NI envisaged an initial two year period of development of the Forum in which:-

- (a) a core membership would be recruited and nurtured,
- (b) the decision making and administrative infrastructure to make the Forum sustainable would be established and consolidated,
- (c) funding would be secured to enable incremental developments beyond this phase, and,
- (d) the phase would culminate in a large-scale public event that members had themselves devised which would represent the formal launch of the group. .

In pursuit of these aims the following phases of development have been engaged in:-

- ❖ winter 2003 – 04 saw an initial period of recruitment, with publicity work undertaken concerning the Forum and the widespread circulation of information about the opportunities it presented to young people; their families; schools and professionals in a range of pertinent fields. This was then followed up by briefings and discussions with those expressing an interest;

- ❖ spring 2004 witnessed a team building and facilitated planning stage, with a residential organised at Strangford and a second event in Newcastle, during which the new members of the Forum engaged in a range of activities which enabled them to get to know each other and establish a workplan of the activities and initiatives they wished to undertake, and training they felt in need of. In parallel with these sessions meetings of geographical clusters of members took place in Belfast, Derry and Newry to establish localised hubs where Forum activity could take place in parallel to and support of the overall regional work of the group. Initially it had been planned to have four localised hubs to broadly mirror the areas covered by the four Health & Social Services Boards, but interest in the Forum at this stage was not equally geographically spread, so that the three centres were chosen as those which best suited the locations and mobility requirements of the majority of Forum members. Work now began on establishing partnership arrangements with organisations viewed as best able to meet the interest members had placed within their workplan on developing media skills; engaging in personal development; increasing their policy related knowledge; trying out outdoor pursuits and gaining lobbying, campaigning and ICT skills.
- ❖ summer 2004 – summer 2005 saw an explosion of programme activity as Forum members regularly came together at both a series of region wide residential gatherings at a range of venues, interspersed with meetings and training sessions at venues within their local hub locations. Residential sessions took place at centres at Rostrevor; Corrymeela, Gortin, and

Lusty Beg which could provide a range of outdoor pursuits to meet the demand for them from members, as well as the facilities to hold workshop and training sessions in addition to meeting the Forum's accommodation requirements. These were major logistical challenges that required considerable volunteer support as well as significant planning, programming and organisational time demands. Additionally residentials placed pressure on the financial resources available, but the socialisation and intensive work schedules they afforded made them cost effective as many more members attended these weekend and week long sessions than they did the one day long sessions. In addition to participation in outdoor pursuits and socialisation the residentials and local hub venue activities allowed members to:

- engage with programmes devised and delivered by the learning through journalism project 'Children's Express'. As well as providing twelve-week programmes of radio journalism training on a one night per week basis at hub venues, Children's Express delivered a range of media workshops at residentials. The purpose of these sessions was not only to enable Forum members to acquire a better understanding of how the media work, and the skills to record and edit interviews as part of radio packages, using MP3 minidisks and associated specialist editing software, valuable though these experiences proved to be, they also enabled the young people to explore and examine topics of interest to them while gaining valuable research skills and an understanding of the narrative structure of effectively

conveying information. Through these programmes and workshops members literally found their voice and a medium by which to convey it. In addition to personal satisfaction at the time several of the young people had pieces they produced broadcast on local radio;

- participate in a series of workshops facilitated by the Northern Ireland Youth Forum examining issues around the nature of equality and human rights, discrimination and social exclusion and the structures and policy making processes that need to be targeted and influenced to bring about changes in the agendas in these spheres. Not surprisingly given the nature of the subject matter some members found these sessions, while interesting, heavy going at times, though all agreed they were extremely useful;
- take part in campaigning and lobbying training both with freelance trainers and the WIMPS (Where Is My Public Servant) project from the Public Achievement organisation. This sparked much interest, with a number of members following up by spearheading campaigning on employment and right to accessible information issues which other members will join following completion of their efforts on the forthcoming C R Vision conference on October 27th 2005;
- undertake a range of ICT training hosted by the RNIB NI and Queens University in Belfast. Accessibility software such as Zoomtext, Jaws and Supernova were explored as were the techniques of creating a website. Skills such as the use of

email were also covered for those unfamiliar with some of the more basic aspects of computing;

Additionally, a range of discussion sessions were facilitated by RNIB NI staff to give members the opportunity to discuss issues of concern and put in place a workplan of desired activity once the initial two-year developmental phase ends. Throughout this period meetings were also held to develop the structure of the initiative with officers being elected and to deal with the ongoing business of the Forum. It was during this period that members voted to re-brand the project as Eye Matter and to organise it along two geographical divisions based on the eastern and western areas of Northern Ireland. The adoption of the new name was indicative of a growing sense of ownership amongst the members during this period.

- ❖ summer – autumn was dominated by preparations for the C R Vision conference and public launch of Eye Matter in October 2005. Members programmed the event, worked with RNIB NI staff on the associated logistics and undertook presentation and facilitation training. The lead up to this ambitious event saw an enormous amount of learning with regard to organisational and communication skills and proved to be an effective team building exercise in its own right, as members worked both collectively and took on individual roles. If hard work translates into success this conference should prove to be a watershed event in the life of Eye Matter and see them emerge as a force to be reckoned with.

PROFILES OF SIX EYE MATTER MEMBERS

Thomas Quigley

I'm 25, currently living in Newry but planning to move up to Belfast in the near future.

I was born in County Mayo and moved to Newry with my family when I was seven and then attended a mainstream primary school in the town for a few years. Problems with my retinas meant that my sight was deteriorating during this period, so much so that by the time I was ten things weren't working for me at school, it was pointless being there, so I moved to Jordanstown special school. I boarded there from Sunday to Friday - the change was tough for a few weeks but I got used to it and learned to get on with things. At seventeen I went to study sound engineering at the specialist college in Hereford and was there until I was nineteen when I returned home.

I'm an independent person and live on my own. Though not currently romantically attached you could say that my radar is on in that department! Interests-wise I'm into a wide range of music and enjoy most sports particularly football - as a keen Manchester United fan I try to get over to Old Trafford once or twice a season.

The experience of being involved in Eye Matter has altered my goals in terms of employment. Since Hereford I've been looking for a job in sound engineering but seeing the positive effects on members of the whole Eye Matter experience I've shifted direction, and am going to train as a youth worker. That will open up more

job opportunities and I'll be able to use my recording and music skills as tools to engage with young people.

Before I became involved with Eye Matter I had been at a bit of a loose end. I'd been to various community meetings about social and disability issues but generally found myself to be the youngest person attending, and if there were other youngish people there we would only be a small minority. So when I heard about Eye Matter I was attracted by the idea of being a young person amongst other young people. The chance to meet new people and socialise was appealing while the whole idea of working with other young people to press for change about things which really matter grabbed me.

If I'm honest, at the start I expected it to begin with a bit of a flourish and then peter out after a short time because that's the way lots of things go, but here we are, still going strong and getting stronger! Basically Eye Matter has exceeded my expectations so far and I feel we have a solid future as long as we attract the funding to make our activities and work possible.

The mix of having fun together and jointly working on serious issues has laid a strong foundation we can build on. We have a solid core of young people who regularly turn up and want to get things done but we're not a clique and are always on the look out for new members. I would recommend Eye Matter membership to any young person who is blind or has sight problems who wants to do more with their life than just sit about and complain. If they choose to join they'll get lots out of it, I certainly have.

The C R Vision conference (in October 2005) is intended to be much more than a one off event. While it is a milestone for us because we haven't organised anything on such a large scale before, with it we're publicly launching Eye Matter as a force to be reckoned with in the future.

In the past the sorts of change young people with sight problems wanted was slow to come or didn't materialise because we didn't have an organised voice, and what pressure there was wasn't sustained. In the future change will come because Eye Matter is in for the long haul.

The issues we have identified as important are ones that we won't let go off, we will press on and on until we achieve the sorts of changes that must happen to allow young people with sight problems to have the opportunity to lead decent lives. We have the advantage of being focused and motivated; we know what we are talking about and understand how to get our message across through the media.

I'm optimistic that once the Assembly gets back up and running we'll see movement and progress on key issues for us such as employment and education, because we'll be in a position to access local politicians who are accountable and we'll be able to persuade them of both the justice of our cause and the sense of our proposed positive actions and solutions.

Rhondalee Nash

I'm 25 and live in Derry which has always been home for me except for a period from when I was seven to fourteen when my family lived in London.

Due to a rare disease that affected my optic nerve my sight started to disappear when I was ten and worsened through the years to the point that I became totally blind. Despite this I continued at mainstream school where I pretty much received the support I needed after the teachers realised what was happening.

At first people at school thought I had dyslexia because I showed problems with reading and writing, but after the visual cause of my difficulties was identified thanks to an excellent Rehab Worker and fantastic parents I continued my education and went on to study for and get an HND in Health and Social Care.

I'm not working at the moment as my health is somewhat up and down. I had wanted to be a social worker as I've always wanted to help people but I think it's probably not practical as I don't drive because of my sight; am a wheelchair user and have both MS and epilepsy. When my health allows I plan to train and then work as a counsellor.

I live with my family and have no immediate plans to set up my own home. In leisure terms I enjoy socialising, swimming and computing. I'm not in a relationship at the moment but who knows what the future holds on that front.

Of course at times I get frustrated and down about my eyesight but generally I accept my situation and to be honest I don't focus on it. I have both sighted friends, from school, college and the city generally, and friends with sight problems I've made from my time with Eye Matter.

I first heard of Eye Matter from a letter from the RNIB NI office. I was interested because it seemed a good way to meet new people. It took a little while for things to get going because there weren't enough young people from Derry who put themselves forward to join, maybe because some people prefer getting involved in something that is already up and running rather than having the responsibility of getting things off the ground. When we spread the net wider to take in the area sweeping from Omagh up to Coleraine we got the core of people needed to get the momentum going and keep it going.

Since Eye Matter started I've really got a lot out of it. Like I hoped I met all sorts of people, made some good friends and we've had some great craic. That's important, but it's turned out to have been about more than that for me.

The residentials have been very important for bringing us all together and letting us really get to know each other. They have been great fun and gave us the chance to hear about each others' experiences and to exchange views on big issues. We all tried out new things. I can't do all the outdoor pursuits stuff but I loved crab fishing, while the off road driving at Lusty Beg was, shall we say, an experience!

Learning about things was great and I thought the ICT and web training in Belfast was brilliant. I got a real thrill from putting the lobbying and campaigning skills we got from residential sessions into practise by contacting local politicians about the right to read campaign. Mark Durkin came back and gave his full support and passed our concerns onto the NIO Minister Angela Smith. Barbara de Bruin showed that she was really listening and interested, so getting a positive reaction from two of the Ministers in the old Executive wasn't a bad start. We can build on these beginnings

Planning the (C R Vision) conference has got everyone in Eye Matter very excited because we will get to have our say and get our points across to people who can make some of the changes we want and feel we deserve.

Brendan Bonnar

I'm 25 and live in Aghadowey near Coleraine which has always been home for me. I went to Jordanstown special school, where I boarded, attending right through primary and secondary stages, and then continued my education at the specialist college in Hereford where I majored in Business Studies. After returning home I took a Media Studies course at the further education college in Ballymoney specialising in both the academic and hands on aspects of radio production and journalism. Then began my so far unsuccessful search for a job in the radio industry.

Currently I live with my family though I plan to live independently at some point in the future. I'm not romantically attached at present but a long term relationship is something I hope looms in the

horizon. Along with listening to the radio I count swimming and meals out with friends as my major hobbies.

I've been blind from birth and so am pretty well adjusted to the difficulties that come as part of the package. The biggest frustration for me in this regard is the struggle to get a job despite having the qualifications and experience. Still, I certainly haven't given up and am looking for an opening at the moment to help out in a voluntary capacity at a radio studio. I'm prepared to do anything to move towards my goal of presenting my own show.

I've been involved with Eye Matter from the very beginning. When I heard about it from the RNIB NI office I was really keen because I was keen to meet new people, experience things I haven't done and get involved in campaigning for the rights of young blind and partially sighted people.

Eye Matter has surpassed what I was hoping for when I first joined. The sessions that Children's Express ran as programmes and at residential were meat and drink to me, and I was delighted with the six months placement I had as a volunteer with them which came out of this contact. I helped out at their Derry bureau two days a week and it was great to be able to assist the children and young people who use this excellent project and hone my own radio skills at the same time.

It's great that Eye Matter has been about more than simply getting out of the house, though having a reason to get out and about is itself good for your morale.

I've relished the contact with other members and very much enjoyed the chance to give outdoor pursuits a go, particularly the rock climbing and water sports. The training and hands on experience in creating a website for the group was first rate, it really interested me and I look forward to being involved in further developing the site as a resource. The lobbying work we have done to encourage banks to accessibly make information available to blind and partially sighted customers at local branches rather than only from their head offices has been a highlight for me. Visiting banks, as we did in Coleraine and Derry made me feel we really could make a difference because we were raising awareness of need and showing how it could be simply met. As Eye Matter moves into its next phase I'm looking forward to really getting my teeth into campaigning.

The Eye Matter experience through training days and residential workshop sessions to date means we know how to campaign. Its not as if what we're asking for is outlandish is it - a fair crack of the whip is all we're seeking. The (C R Vision) conference is an important stepping stone for us, both because it gives us a platform and because Eye Matter members have learnt a lot about how to go about things through the experience of organising it.

I know that Eye Matter has a mountain to climb to get the sort of changes we want, but it feels to me we're organised and equipped as a team at the base camp. We've got the right maps and the energy for the ascent – that's got to be a whole lot better than wandering around alone lost on the slopes.

Paula Meenan

I'm 21 and live at home with my family in Omagh in County Tyrone where I've spent my whole life so far. After mainstream primary and secondary schooling I studied for and got professional childcare qualifications at the local further education college.

I had a good educational experience as the needs arising from my partial sightedness were addressed well at both school and FE levels, although when I hear about what happened to some of the other members of Eye Matter I realise how fortunate I was in this regard. Something as important as your education shouldn't be a matter of luck should it?

Reading is my great passion. I enjoy both large print books and audio cassettes, though the limited range means that I do take on ordinary print depending on whether I can manage the particular typeface used. I do wish more titles were available in large print because its frustrating being excluded from something as ordinary as reading a book you want to enjoy or get information you need from.

Fortunately I have a job which I love. I'm employed as a childcare worker as part of a team of three at a crèche looking after small children who range from babies to three years olds. I say fortunately, because though I am qualified, motivated and have the right sort of temperament for the work I do, I still feel lucky as I'm the only member of Eye Matter in paid employment at the moment.

Lots of partially sighted and blind young people, and older ones for that matter, have the skills to work, or the aptitude to learn them, given half a chance. I feel lucky because my employer didn't have the kind of attitude that's totally coloured by negativity about what people with sight problems supposedly can't do. What they were interested in, in my case, was the needs of young children and my ability to meet these in a skilled, effective and caring way.

I'm sure the fact that I'm partially sighted gave them pause for thought, but that's just it, they *thought* about it and on consideration saw I could do it. I can't drive, but then again that's not a necessary aspect of the job. Other jobs do need the person doing them to move about, but with a bit of planning and a willingness to use imagination, it becomes clear that having a driving licence isn't as essential as it might seem at first sight.

The whole area of attitudes is something I feel strongly about. Not just when it comes to how prejudiced perceptions influence whether or not someone gets a job but in terms of how ill-informed opinions lead to all kinds of assumptions about partially sighted and blind people being made.

The challenge is to make employers, service providers and the general public aware of what it's like to be partially sighted or blind so they understand we are people like them and like them we have particular needs. If ordinary vision is all that people know then you can't blame them for not understanding what our needs are. They need to be informed through training and awareness raising

activities. I know that some of this goes on but there needs to be a lot more of it. It's something Eye Matter can play a role in.

The impetus to join Eye Matter when I heard about it was to meet new people. I live in a rural area outside Omagh where there isn't much in the way of public transport and a taxi into the town costs £12 and the same home. You can get lifts but that depends on people's availability and it doesn't feel great being dependent on other people anyway. So I can feel a bit isolated and cut off where I live.

It's been great getting to know the other Eye Matter members and meeting up with them at residential and training days. Because we are so scattered we haven't really met up outside of this but I'm hoping that we can organise more social occasions and outings as Eye Matter develops.

I've pretty much enjoyed all aspects of the project so far and like the mix of fun things like the outdoor pursuits with the more serious topics. The WIMPS stuff on lobbying made me think and the web design and other ICT activity was both fun and informative.

I think planning the (C R Vision) conference has been important as a focus and I really hope the day goes well and helps us take Eye Matter to a new level. I'd say we have a determined core within the group who will make sure we keep going so as long as we secure funding for the next stage of development. I'd say --- watch this space if you want to see some real change!

Stephen McKinstry

I'm 16, live in Belfast with my family and am still at school.

From the beginning of my education I've gone to Jordanstown special school which has been fine. The only downside of going to a school in a different part of the city to where I live is that I don't socialise with people from round my way as they know each other from the schools they go to.

Still, I do have friends from outside of school, as I go to a club at the church my family belongs to. I've been going there since I was a wee kid and I must say that the people who run it are very clued up about including children with any sort of disability – that's a lot more than can be said for lots of the other youth clubs and the like that I've heard about from other people.

I'm partially sighted and have very fair hair which sometimes attracts unwelcome attention – it can be hurtful when people call you names. Then again there's some who call all kinds of people cruel names, I guess they're just ignorant in both senses of the word.

I'm into the same type of stuff as other people my age, like football and computers, and no I'm not going out with anyone at the moment which suits me just fine at the moment! All in all I'm pretty happy.

The one thing that has hit me lately is that I'm not going to be able to drive. I always knew that of course, but I feel it more now

because other people my age - I'll be seventeen very soon - are getting provisional licences and starting lessons. It's just something I'll have to come to terms with because it's something that can't be changed.

The other thing I'm trying to face up to at the moment is what decision to make this coming June. I'm doing my GCSEs then, and the question is should I stay on in full-time education until I'm nineteen or try to get some work experience through a course at a tech. that involves practical work placements? At the moment I think I'd like to work with computers but my mind isn't fixed yet career wise.

Even though I think things in the world are changing and opening up for people with sight problems it's happening slowly, too slowly. Doing my bit to speed up things on the change front was one of the reasons I joined Eye Matter. The other motivation was to get to know some new people and socialise generally.

I've really enjoyed meeting and getting to know the other people in Eye Matter. While we look at issues affecting young people who are partially sighted or blind in the workshop and training sessions it's not the focus when we socialise, then we're just young people having a good time together. Still it's nice to be with people who understand certain things and not have to go around explaining stuff to do with your vision. It means you can really relax and be yourself.

I've learned a lot about all kinds of things from the discussions we've had. I didn't fully understand lots of issues before I enjoyed the group and I've been impressed by the way that everyone really gets a chance to get their point of view across and everyone else actually listens. It doesn't mean we agree with each other all the time about everything, but everyone respects each other enough to give each other a hearing.

Children's Express ran a whole series of great sessions and I went to part of their own summer programme this year. It was made up of a whole load of taster sessions on various sorts of journalism and creative expression. What really impressed me was the way I was included without there being a song and dance.

With Eye Matter the outdoor pursuits were great and I found the web site and ICT training interesting and challenging. The lobbying work we did with WIMPS opened my eyes so to speak, and while Thomas and Rhondalee have taken the lead on following that up I'm keen to get more involved in campaigning as that side of Eye Matter develops after the (C R Vision) conference. That's going to be an important event and I hope it launches the group into the minds of people who matter when it comes to changing things.

Kelsey McQuaid

I'm 17 and from Banbridge in County Down which is where I've spent all my life so far.

I live with my family and though I'm partially sighted have always gone to mainstream schools. At the minute I've just started sixth

form at the integrated secondary school I've been attending since I was eleven, and intend to go to university in two years time, maybe in Coleraine or maybe in Bangor in North Wales.

I like spending time with friends and going to the cinema and live on a pretty even keel as I don't let difficulties because of my vision get me down. Although I'm not going out with anyone just now I wouldn't rule it out in the future.

Psychology and journalism are the two careers that attract me. I hadn't thought about journalism until the Children's Express sessions with Eye Matter but these were so good and so interesting that I decided to become a member of it as well as Eye Matter. It was one of the best things I've ever done because I learned so much, got to meet so many different people and produced radio material that was broadcast on BBC Radio Foyle.

It was while I was doing some work experience at the RNIB NI office in Belfast that I heard about Eye Matter. I decided to join because I wanted to meet and spend time with other young people like me. Apart from the Children's Express workshops, which as I've said I really got into, I did pretty much all the outdoor pursuits activities, it was great to give things a go that I hadn't previously had the chance to try. I took part in all aspects of Eye Matter and got more out of it than I thought possible at the start.

For me it's what happens after the (C R Vision) conference that will be most telling. It's great that we're getting to plan it and have an opportunity to speak our minds but it will be what happens next

that will be important. Will there be meaningful changes in response to the event and future Eye Matter work? In the past there have been lots of documents and policy reports about the needs of partially sighted and blind people but they haven't really been acted on.

It's hard not to conclude that the reason why various much needed changes have been so slow or haven't happened at all is because the issues don't matter enough to those who can take the decisions to act or not act. So I suppose the challenge is to make them care enough to act now on things like education and supporting parents of children with sight problems. I feel strongly about these issues.

I don't think children and young people with sight problems are pushed enough at special school to reach their potential. This is a shame because anybody who is partially sighted or blind is always going to be disadvantaged and the only way they stand a chance of levelling things out a bit in their favour is to get decent qualifications, how else will they overcome the barriers they'll face to getting a job and making a living?

I also feel strongly that parents who have children with sight problems need advice and guidance to help their child to grow in independence. Key to this is getting the right information in timely fashion. I know many health visitors and social workers do a great job but still too many parents are not getting the information they need. There needs to be more work done to help parents become aware of the sources of help that exist.

In the end I think real change will come when organisations like the RNIB are run by blind and partially sighted people. I'm not saying that the sighted people in positions of power in a charity like that don't care, because they clearly do. All I'm putting forward for discussion is the idea that sighted people can empathise but can't fully understand. Maybe they can learn something from Eye Matter where sighted people provide support but blind and partially sighted people make the decisions.

BENEFITS & IMPACTS

Whilst the nature and extent of impact of involvement in Eye Matter has varied between members according to their individual starting points, experience and degree of engagement in the project, the following positive benefits have been observably discernible amongst core members.

1. Self Confidence & Esteem

Core members developed an increased sense of self confidence and esteem arising from:-

- developing a sense of camaraderie within, and belonging to, a group which provided an environment experienced as supportive, nurturing; accepting and above all safe and non-threatening;
- acquiring an individual and collective voice by which to articulate opinions and needs as part of a process rooted in the desire to produce solution focused analysis with the purpose of leading to achievable positive change;
- gaining a sense of achievement through facing and meeting a series of personal challenges;
- becoming more assured of capabilities and potential;
- being more outward and forward looking arising from sustained meaningful contact with others and a feeling of gaining a better understanding of the dynamics of the forces that shape their lives.

2. Self Awareness

Members acquired a deeper sense of what motivated them through their participation in the project and developed an increased understanding of the relationship between their emotions and their behaviour, leading to an increased capacity to self manage. Additionally in this area, members gained a truer sense of their strengths and weakness and progressively were prepared to work on developing their capacities with regard to the latter.

3. Communication

Members gained enormously in this area in terms of developing their abilities to both articulate their views and actively listen to those of others. Allied to such progress was a marked improvement in their ability to reflect on new information, and pause for thought to integrate fresh material into their thinking, so that when they chose to communicate it was from a more considered position. Such improvements in interpersonal communication were matched by greatly developing their abilities to present their ideas to larger groups and constructively critique the ideas of others.

4. Isolation & Loneliness

Members responded extremely positively to the socialisation that participation in the project afforded, reporting a lessening of feelings of isolation and loneliness that many had experienced at the outset of the project. These positive outcomes were due to:-

- the physical opportunity to engage in semi-regular meaningful, enjoyable and stimulating contact with others, and,

- the psychological / emotional sense of playing a part in an initiative that was bigger than themselves and therein developing a sense of themselves as more similar to and less different to others than many of their previous experiences suggested and reinforced.

5. Skills Development

Members developed 'hard' and 'soft' skills in terms of:-

- ICT skills in relation to an increased understanding of the practical applications of email; web site design and development; minidisk MP3 digital recording equipment and associated editing software gained through supportive training and hands on experience;
- advocacy skills clustered around the abilities to evaluate needs; examine the available options for ways in which those needs can be met; identification of sources of influence and power to approach and the capacity to present a coherent case for positive action;
- organisational skills in terms of the ability to structure, programme and effectively participate in small and large events;
- decision making and planning skills in terms of the ability to evaluate competing demands and perspectives and make an informed decision concerning a preferred option;
- team working skills developing through collaboration and co-operation with peers on a wide range of varied tasks.

6. Leadership

For a small number of project participants an important outcome has been the progressive development of their ability to take on the mantle and responsibilities of leadership, both as formal office bearers and informally as positive influencers and opinion formers amongst the wider Eye Matter membership. This bodes well, not only for their own personal futures, but also for the development of Eye Matter in terms of the project's internal capacity to increasingly self manage and progressively ease its dependence on RNIB NI logistical and administrative support.

ISSUES & CONCERNS

The following issues have been consistently identified as matters of deep concern to members of Eye Matter as having a negative impact on their lives and future life chances and those of their peers with sight difficulties.

◆ **Effecting Change**

The young people who form the membership of Eye Matter have a strong conviction that amongst the spectrum of people with physical and sensory disabilities that those with sight problems have historically had their needs and interests less well represented than others.

They do not begrudge the progress which people who are deaf or have physical disabilities have made. However, they consider the comparative lack of progress they believe blind and partially sighted people have made, in terms of securing the type of change generations of them have identified, to be down to historically comparatively more effective lobbying by groups representing the interests of other people with disabilities, and a less than robust approach to lobbying and campaigning adopted by organisations working on their behalf.

Eye Matter members believe that such lacklustre attempts at campaigning have been compounded by an almost total historical absence of user controlled self advocacy groups made up of blind and partially sighted people in Northern Ireland.

Both RNIB NI's recent renewed emphasis on campaigning and awareness raising, and the organisation's support to nurture the emergence of Eye Matter itself, are felt by group members to herald a forthcoming period of effective pressure to secure the sort of change that can transform their own lives and those of their fellow citizens who are blind and partially sighted.

◆ **Attitudes**

Eye Matter members keenly feel that attitudes informed more by stereotypes than anything that reflected the reality of their lives, represented the single most important barrier that needed to be dismantled, if they and those that follow them are to have the type of opportunities to live rewarding lives.

They feel that attitudes based on a mixture of pity and fear lead to them being patronised, excluded and ignored. The antidote to this as far as Eye Matter members are concerned is for there to be a widespread and sustained public information campaign backed up by programmes of visual awareness training. As with other areas members of Eye Matter are aware that this will require the earmarking of considerable funding by resource holders to be effective.

◆ **Education**

Whilst opinions diverged amongst Eye Matter members as to their personal preferences for the ideal educational model, they are united in considering current arrangements as grossly inadequate and failing to provide a coherent system in which young people

with sight problems are assisted and supported to reach their potential.

Again and again through encounters with Eye Matter members, it became apparent that they considered present educational arrangements to be adding to the difficulties arising from impaired or a lack of vision, rather than being a source which counter balanced the inherent disadvantages that arise from it. To be sure some members had positive and life enhancing educational experiences, but it was interesting and disturbing to note that they considered themselves to be lucky in this regard because their contact with others led them to understand that this was far from the norm, and could usually be traced to the efforts of particular enlightened and energetic heads of school and teachers.

Eye Matter members individually endorse both mainstream and special education approaches to delivering primary and secondary education. What they want to see is meaningful choice for children and parents in which options are both available and explained. They want to see improved teacher training which means that all teachers working in mainstream settings are equipped to teach pupils with sight problems.

Additionally Eye Member members want to see an end to what they experience as an educational bureaucracy, which they and their parents feel they are battling against simply to access the equipment, associated training in its use and funding they require to engage with whatever form of education they are involved in.

Eye Matter members feel that there is confusion amongst providers, that there is a lack of coherence amongst the current system and consider that in the further and higher educational sectors there is pervasive disarray about how to meet the needs of students who are blind or have a visual impairment.

In this regard the situation as Eye Matter members understand it, surrounding the specialist college in Hereford, is a case in point. Some members view critically the idea that to access third level educational facilities that incorporate staff trained in visual difficulties, and the availability of equipment designed to meet the needs of young students who are blind or visually impaired as is the case in Hereford, that they have to travel as boarders to England. Others accept what they see as the reality of having to travel to a centre whose expertise and resources are highly unlikely to be duplicated in other settings.

Travelling to Hereford has until recently been an option chosen by some given that no such parallel provision exists in Northern Ireland. For some of those who have followed this route it has been experienced as both meeting their needs and representing a staging post in developing their independence. Others have decided they would rather make do with what the FE sector locally has to offer so as not to uproot themselves.

However, as Eye Matter members understand the situation, the N.I. Education and Library Boards have withdrawn the funding support to enable Northern Irish young people to attend Hereford. In the case of one Eye Matter member who had completed the first

of a three-year course at Hereford, the withdrawal of funding has meant an interruption in her studies and forced an attempt to explore the options available at BIFHE.

Her experience in this chimes with those of a cross section of Eye Matter members concerning various higher and further educational colleges in Northern Ireland, in that they have encountered the absence of a coherent system to meaningfully integrate students with sight problems.

Amongst the issues raised by Eye Matter members are an absence of orientation training to enable blind and partially sighted students to become comfortable and familiar with the buildings and campus they are to attend classes in, engage in and individually study at and hopefully mix with other members of the student body. Eye Matter members felt that the response to their needs were at best cobbled together with a scramble to assess their needs; and provide support, make requisite reasonable adjustments and source and assign equipment.

A particularly ludicrous and indicting example of failing to meet need came from the personal experience of a blind member of Eye Matter, who was assigned an assistant to take lecture notes at a perhaps best to remain nameless college. This was on the face of it helpful, though the fact that the notes were made available to the student in print rather than on audio proved somewhat less useful given that she is totally blind.

Eye Matter members are acutely aware that they face an uphill struggle in the job market. Whilst appreciating that education is about much more than equipping them for employment, they point to the fact that if they are to become economically active they need to achieve the highest levels of qualifications their abilities allow for and the greatest range of transferable skills possible. They cannot understand why policy makers and practitioners have to date found the creation of educational opportunity that genuinely meets the needs of blind and partially sighted children so elusive.

Eye Matter members are hopeful that the new Special Educational Needs and Disability (NI) Order will make a positive difference to the current situation. It is their intention to monitor its impact to establish its effectiveness.

◆ **Employment**

Jobs, and the lack of them, for young adults who are blind or partially sighted, greatly occupies the minds of Eye Matter members, only one of whom is currently in paid employment. They point to the fact that 75% of people with sight problems of working age are unemployed, and that this figure hasn't changed a decade after the passing of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995.

Eye Matter members believe that there are a cocktail of factors at the root cause of the scandalous unemployment rate and the fact that few of those who are employed are in well paid high status jobs. For them, lack of enforcement of the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) allows all too prevalent negative attitudes fuelled by stereotypes and misconceptions on the part of employers as to the

abilities of people with sight difficulties to go unchallenged. They feel too that the outdated notions that there are types of jobs that are suitable for blind or partially sighted workers, colloquially known as 'telephonist syndrome', remains widespread because of a mixture of less than vigorous implementation of the DDA and the patchy nature of awareness training with employers.

The fact that recruitment relies so extensively on print media which is inaccessible to many blind and partially sighted people is cited by the young people as a contributory factor to employment difficulties. So too is their experience of Disablement Employment Advisers (DEAs), with whom they say their contact has shown to be generally well intentioned, but frequently unaware and lacking training in the whole area of sight difficulties.

In an era which has seen unprecedented reliance on ICT at work Eye Matter members point to the fact that access-providing software such as Zoomtext, Supernova and Jaws make many jobs within the reach of blind and partially sighted people. They conclude that the way the potential such software provides has not been reached is in part down to employers lack of awareness of such technology and what it enables prospective employees with sight problems to do.

Eye Matter members consider the lack of understanding on employers' part as to the liberating nature of such software, as part of a wider lack of awareness as to the nature and extent of employment related back up from the RNIB NI, statutory services

and others which is available to help them and the employees they take on who have sight problems.

With decent orientation training relating to a workplace, access to enabling technology and training in its use together with enlightened employers able to see past unhelpful attitudes, Eye Matter members believe there is a wide range of jobs their members and other young people who are blind or partially sighted can do. They are looking for the implementation of meaningful equal opportunities policies in the employment arena, not a charitable outlook from benevolent employers.

With an extensive awareness raising and associated training programme targeting employers and DEAs the landscape in the labour market for blind and partially sighted young adults can be dramatically altered believe Eye Matter members.

One other employment related avenue some of the young people involved in Eye Matter consider could help in this sphere is for imaginative training and support programmes for young people with sight difficulties who wish to become self employed or start their own business. Although Invest NI, amongst others, do provide programmes for those wanting to follow the path of the entrepreneur, there is clear merit in young people who are blind or partially sighted participating in a tailor-made programme designed to address all the general product and service development concerns associated with self employment, but which addresses the particular issues facing those seeking to run a business who have sight problems.

The creation of the circumstances, in which all those young people who have sight difficulties who can work, are able to find and hold down employment is a priority for Eye Matter members. They consider this a key route not only to income, with the associated choices and independence hard cash brings, but to fulfilment and integration as full members of the community.

◆ **Parenting**

Whilst accepting the influences of heredity on formation of character and personality and the impact of formative experiences outside of the family, members consider that the approach taken by their parents is critical in the development of how children and young people come to see themselves and their present and future position in the world.

Whilst recognising and empathising with the anxieties and fears that parents of offspring with sight problems naturally have Eye Matter members consider that overprotective behaviours are damaging to healthy development in many ways, and can spawn many problems for young people who are blind or partially sighted.

Parenting of any child is difficult, but at least those with sighted children can turn to peers in the same position as themselves when difficulties arise, and can model their general approach on observation of others taking the type of approach they view as desirable. Many parents with children with sight difficulties find themselves isolated in a situation that is unique amongst the circles they move in, in the absence of knowing anyone else whose child has similar sight difficulties to their own.

Access to information, advice and guidance from a reputable and approachable source is, Eye Matter members consider, crucial for parents in this situation to help them with their own issues as parents, and so assist them to assist their children with sight difficulties in the most wholesome way possible.

Increased investment in training professionals such as health visitors and social workers to support and enable the expansion of existing imaginative parent and family work by the RNIB NI would be one of the most effective uses of resources according to Eye Matter.

◆ **Accessible 'Information'**

'Information' appears here in inverted commas as the focus of concern is access to what, for sighted people is material using print characters, be it literature of one sort or factual information conveyed by a range of means including correspondence; screens at transport hubs such as airports, bus and train stations; timetables; event programmes and myriad other ways.

Eye Matter members had a range of points in this sphere. Firstly in cultural terms they point to the fact that only a small proportion of books are available as audio cassettes or CDs, while, when they are available, the purchase price of the latter is disproportionate, with for example the audio version of 'Harry Potter and the Half Blood Prince' being between four and five times the price of the printed edition.

Secondly they point to the routine exclusion that results from material not being available in large print, Braille and audio versions. Examples cited abounded and ranged from attending a church where the words of hymns are projected on a screen which left the Eye Matter member in question unable to fully engage in worship, because she couldn't see it, through to the use of power point presentations at conferences. The projection or power point displays are not objected to, what is, is the absence of alternative ways of simultaneously accessing the material.

Thirdly, for Eye Matter members, there is the question of why material of a personal nature could not as a matter of course be sent to them in an accessible format. Whilst Members cited institutions, businesses and organisations who fulfilled their obligations in this regard, these were seen as exceptions where the norm leaves the young people in question, even as young adults, with no alternative but to ask sighted family members and friends to read letters to them that were produced in small point script. Ironically NHS Eye Clinics were amongst the worst offenders in the young people's experience.

Fourthly, members of Eye Matter could not understand why, when printed material such as timetables and event programmes are produced in formats they can read, often motivated by compliance with the DDA, why these were not routinely available from booking kiosks and information points but had to be specially sent off for from a head office.

Members essentially want three simple things. Firstly, that material of all sorts is routinely produced in large print, audio and Braille formats, that its availability is publicised imaginatively rather than merely through print media outlets which are themselves inaccessible, and thirdly that having been produced and publicised they are readily available at standard information points.

◆ **Transport & Mobility**

A harsh reality for young people who are partially sighted or blind is that they are unable to drive a car in a society in which it is the norm to do so and takes for granted the personal freedom and flexibility that it brings. For Eye Matter members this means reliance on public transport; taxis; lifts from family or friends or walking.

Clearly walking is only an option for short local journeys, whilst taxis are expensive and lifts are not only not always available but are not conducive to a sense of independence.

For the blind or partially sighted person who wants to live an active life public transport is essential.

Eye Matter members have a range of concerns in the public transport sphere. Firstly, they are bemused why it is that in Northern Ireland registered blind people are eligible for free travel on public transport, whilst those who are partially sighted get only a 50% discount on ticket prices. They point to the fact that people in either category are equally unable to hold driving licences so

find the pricing distinction bizarre particularly when this is not the case in other jurisdictions in the UK.

Secondly, they are keen to engage with Translink to explore ways in which the public transport system in Northern Ireland can be made more accessible to them, by making it easier to use by drawing on the innovations introduced elsewhere.

High on their priorities are the adoption of a system of verbal announcements on buses to make clear the location of the stop that is being approached. They also wish to see the universal adoption of a similar system for railway stations, as the young people's experience is that currently this is done only patchily on trains here.

Eye Matter would also welcome the introduction of screen displays on trains and buses providing destination and progress information shown in a clear font, at a large point size and using appropriate colour contrast.

Additionally, life would be made a great deal easier for blind and partially sighted travellers using buses if bus stops were equipped with speakers to enable drivers to announce their approach. This would be particularly helpful at request stops served by buses on more than one route, as at present a partially sighted traveller is forced to flag down any bus shaped blur in order to ascertain whether or not it is the one they want. More than one bus driver has colourfully expressed their exasperation when, in their view, they have been needlessly waved down.

A third area which Eye Matter members want addressed concerning public transport is one they share with other regular users – that of the need for an integrated transport policy where routes and times join up to enable ease of journeys involving transfers.

For young people who are blind or partially sighted an increase in imaginative community transport initiatives, including their needs in the operators plans, would be a welcome means of lowering the profound social isolation they frequently experience to an even greater extent than their urban counterparts.

◆ **Youth Service**

Members considered the formal and informal youth service to be both essentially irrelevant to them, and to be a source compounding the exclusion and isolation of young blind and partially sighted people.

They characterised the youth service as operating out of buildings which range from being simply inaccessible, to failing to provide simple navigation and orientation devices and being staffed by workers and volunteers who are ignorant of their needs, misinformed by stereotypes and lacking in training concerning integrating them meaningfully.

Additionally when young people with sight problems were determined enough to overcome these barriers Eye Matter members criticised the vast majority of formal and informal youth service initiatives as failing to adapt their programmes of activity to

enable them to meaningfully take part. Instead, where on the surface blind and partially sighted young people were included in that they attended, they found themselves excluded because they could not participate in what was on offer so that their attendance understandably tended to be short lived.

The consequence of this has been that by and large young blind and partially sighted people are not part of the population served by the formal and informal youth services, so that they miss out on the personal development and socialisation opportunities available to their contemporaries.

Sadly, the confidence building and nurturing of independence on offer to peers through the youth service cannot currently be accessed by the vast majority of young people who are blind or partially sighted. This hampers their journey to maturity; robs them of the experience of mixing with others from an array of backgrounds; reduces their opportunities to engage in safe risk taking and reinforces their isolation and sense of 'otherness' so damaging their self-image.

Members welcomed the RNIB NI's creation of a programme of training for youth service personnel in how they can practically go about including young people with sight problems, although they were disappointed to note that across Northern Ireland only eight practitioners had enrolled.

It would seem that the only remedy for the current lamentable state of affairs is some sort of vigorous strategic initiative aimed at

enabling the participation of young people with sight problems in the formal and informal youth service.

To be effective this will need to be co-ordinated by those charged with the development of youth service policy and provision, working in partnership with the likes of Eye Matter and the RNIB NI, to develop an initiative which is aimed at effectively influencing and equipping youth service providers and youth work educationalists. Only in the wake of such an effort, if successful, will formal and informal youth services be able to count young people who are blind or partially sighted as part of the constituency they serve.

◆ **Independent Living**

At the time of writing only one member of Eye Matter lives independently in the sense of heading up their own household, everyone else lives with their families.

Whilst not seeing independent living as some sort of Holy Grail by which to judge how successfully a young adult is leading their life, as living with one's family is viewed as a legitimate choice, Eye Matter members believe that young adults who are blind or partially sighted should have available to them the same options as sighted peers in that setting up a home of their own should be a realistic option that is within their grasp. Consequently, living with one's family should be the result of an active choice rather than a default position in the light of there being no viable alternative.

For Eye Matter members who have left school, owner occupation is not a realistic option because of their lack of employment and comparative youth, which militates against having had the time to gather the deposit required to purchase their own home. This leaves two basic potential options in terms of independent living, being either renting a Housing Executive or private sector property or securing sheltered accommodation.

For many Eye Matter members the latter is the more attractive option either as a stepping stone to total independence or to address concerns they have rooted in fears of vulnerability concerning personal security and safety, or becoming isolated and lonely.

The current perception amongst Eye Matter members is that the vast majority of sheltered accommodation that is available which aims to provide support for people with disabilities is aimed at people with learning or physical disabilities. It is their intention to establish to what extent this is the case by contacting relevant organisations such as Leonard Cheshire and housing associations who are providers of sheltered accommodation. This is with the aim of determining if sufficient openings are available, in which case those interested can begin to explore the potential, or if the available choice is limited or inadequate, to begin a process of lobbying for accommodation which is suitable for the needs of young blind or visually impaired people, available to them and carrying with it the support they want and need.

A second area associated with independent living that Eye Matter members have arranged to explore, is in relation to the government's Direct Payments system, with a meeting arranged with specialists in this area set up to take place in the immediate wake of the C R Vision conference.

Eye Matter members want to see a simple system established wherein they have easy access to support which will:-

- ❑ encourage young blind and partially sighted people to actively consider their independent living options,
- ❑ help them address their fears and concerns about striking out on their own;
- ❑ assist in the search to find a suitable property;
- ❑ provide mobility training so that they become familiar with the area that the house or apartment is in; and where required,
- ❑ have adaptations made to the property to meet the tenant's needs arising from their sight difficulties and help source appropriate enabling aids and equipment.

Whilst Eye Matter members' experience leads them to believe that some of this support is available from social workers and occupational therapists in some areas, they feel it is something of a lottery as to who has access to them. Eye Matter wishes to see a universal standard of service across Northern Ireland so that young people with sight difficulties can, when they feel it is appropriate to their needs and circumstances, take action to make independent living a reality.

Conclusion

As can be seen, the partnership between the members of Eye Matter and the RNIB NI has achieved the objectives established for the first two-year period of the Youth Forum, conceptualised back in 2003.

Perhaps the major difficulty faced is that the extent of funding available to Eye Matter was not large enough to allow for the employment of a dedicated Development Officer. This meant that the crucially important co-ordinating, animating and administrative roles that enabled progress thus far fell on an already stretched member of RNIB NI's staff. This has not impeded developments up to now, but if unaltered, the situation will have a limiting effect on the future potential of the initiative.

It is welcome news that the immediate future of Eye Matter has been secured thanks to a recent announcement by the Youth Council that they are extending their funding support to a third year. However additional investment from other funding bodies and interested parties will be required if Eye Matter members are to be enabled to achieve their ambitious future plans.

Whilst programme and support costs are welcome, dedicated developmental support will be required to assist Eye Matter expand its membership and achieve its campaigning and other objectives. Ideally this would come in the form of funding for Development Officers to work with the membership of each of the two geographical hubs of the initiative – Eye Matter East and Eye

Matter West, as well as together on the overall collective regional activity of the project as a whole.

Herein lies the opportunity for one or more readers to answer the challenge alluded to in the Preface – that of how to respond to ‘In Our Sights’. Readers without access to purse strings must answer that question in their own way.

About The Author

Harry Reid is a Partner in the Creative Change consultancy based in Holywood Co Down, which he co-founded in 1997.

Harry is a writer; facilitator; personal development & capacity building trainer; and adviser on matters of organisational communication; project development; consultation; user involvement and participation. Although he works across the full social policy and wellbeing spectrums his particular specialism is in relation to issues concerning people with disabilities.

He followed schooling in Belfast with a social policy degree from Nottingham University and postgraduate study at the University of North London. A decade and a half of communication, project management and editorial positions in London and then back home in Northern Ireland followed with a range of employers including the mental health charity MIND; Hammersmith & Fulham Borough Council; Belfast Law Centre; Disability Action; Equal Opportunities Commission; Community Foundation for N.I.; and the Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action.

During Harry's seven years as a freelance consultant he has worked with a wide range of clients in the statutory and voluntary sectors including:-

- the N I Human Rights Commission
- the Equality Commission for N I
- South Eastern Education & Library Board
- the Community Foundation for N I
- Disability Action
- PlayBoard
- Queens University
- UNISON
- the University of Ulster
- the Rural Development Council
- Arthritis Care
- Dawn Alcohol & Drugs Project
- the Crescent Arts Centre
- Ballymena Community Forum
- Internova
- St Columbs Park House
- the BBC
- the Down District Partnership Board
- Children's Express
- the Institute of Counselling & Personal Development
- the Down Advocacy Movement
- the RNIB
- CALMS
- Mencap
- Age Concern
- Fas
- Save the Children
- Creative Events
- Forward Emphasis

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