

BRIDGE THE GAP

Enhancing employment prospects
for people with a visual impairment
in Liverpool City Region

April 2019 – March 2020

Delivery partners:

Bradbury Fields Services for Blind and Partially Sighted People

Jigsaw Coaching CIC

Merseyside Sight Loss Council



Contents

	Page no
1. Executive Summary	2
2. Introduction	3
3. Background	3
4. Strands of project	5
5. Employer Engagement Event	12
6. Impact on VIs	14
7. Conclusions and discussion	18
8. Recommendations	22
9. Acknowledgements	23
10. References	23
Appendix 1: Workshop responses from Engagement Event	24
Appendix 2: Evaluation of Engagement Event	27
Appendix 3: Independent evaluation	33

1. Executive Summary

Bridge the Gap was a year-long pilot project in Liverpool City Region, designed to explore the factors which contribute to the low levels of employment of people with a visual impairment (VIs) and find ways to address them.

As a collaboration between Bradbury Fields, Jigsaw Coaching CIC and Merseyside Sight Loss Council, it aimed to support 24 VIs individually, to develop a personalised programme to meet their specific needs. These included coaching, advice sessions and tailor-made opportunities in terms of training and networking, with group meetings promoting peer support. The year ended with a high profile event to increase connections between VIs and employers, to demonstrate the skills and potential of VIs and to address the queries or concerns of employers.

Regular feedback was collected from participants throughout the project to ensure it was developed around the needs of the VIs and an independent evaluation was carried out at the end to measure outcomes and impact.

The factors assessed in the evaluation included practical measures such as access to information, awareness of support services, increased knowledge of digital technology and improved interaction with employers. Also, more personal elements such as self-confidence, coping strategies, levels of resilience and connection with peers were used, as important aspects in helping people become ready for work.

One of the intended impacts of the project was to increase the number of VIs in employment in the region - five members of the project were successful in gaining a job during the year, and seven others became more job-ready, applying for vacancies. Another was to improve employer awareness of the skills and strengths of VIs, together with sources of available support and the Employer Engagement event, held at the end of the year helped to achieve this, as well as highlighting further steps that need to be taken.

There are several transferable principles that can be taken from the project so that future projects and interventions can learn from the experiences of Bridge the Gap. It's important that any project is flexible to meet the different requirements of VIs, including personal support, specific training and employer engagement, and would be best delivered in partnership with other specialist services.

The recommendations will be developed further by the Bridge the Gap team, with key strategic partners in the region, to create improved employment opportunities for VIs.

2. Introduction

People of working age who are registered blind or partially sighted are significantly more likely to be unemployed than the general population or people with a different disability, with particular challenges in finding or retaining their job.

This report explores the work done by Bridge the Gap, a collaborative project which set out to address some of the factors which contribute to the low rate of employment. Its aim was to enhance the employment opportunities for 24 people with a visual impairment (VIs) in Liverpool City Region in the year 2019 - 2020.

With funding provided by Visionary (a national membership organisation for sight loss charities) and P.H. Holt Foundation, the project involved a partnership between Bradbury Fields Services for Blind and Partially Sighted, Jigsaw Coaching CIC and Merseyside Sight Loss Council. Other core partners in Liverpool City Region included Wirral Society of the Blind and Partially Sighted and Christopher Grange Sightloss Learning Hub.

Bridge the Gap supported VIs of working age, combining both grass-roots and strategic approaches to improve their prospects of employment, focusing on the following:

1. Identify and address unmet employability needs of VIs
2. Collaborate with partners to create opportunities for employment, volunteering or training
3. Develop strategy for future funding and action

3. Background

Work which utilises a person's skills and abilities is recognised as being good for their well-being, benefitting both physical and mental health and providing economic independence. This was acknowledged in the Government's White Paper 'Improving Lives'¹, which also highlighted the social, moral and economic benefits to the country of harnessing the talents and contribution of its population.

However, many people with a visual impairment (VIs) currently have very limited options to find the opportunities, support or training provided in the right format that they need to flourish. This is against the background of a noticeable drop in the

number of blind or partially-sighted people of working age in employment over the last 10 years, from 42% to 25%². Of those who are completely blind, only 1 in 10 is in paid employment². This means many blind and partially-sighted people are missing the opportunity to use their skills and talents at work.

Further, a RNIB research study observed that VIs who have a degree have a similar chance of getting a job of those without an impairment, with no qualifications³. Age was also found to be significant, following analysis of the My Voice survey data⁴ - those aged 50-64 were less likely to be in employment than those aged 30-49.

The disability employment gap for registered blind and partially sighted people is around double that for people with other disabilities, and this gap is widening², which suggests that VIs may have been more adversely affected by changes to the labour market in recent years than the general population. Government schemes to support disabled people into work, such as the Work Programme, have not significantly helped to improve the overall employment rate of blind and partially sighted people².

VIs, whether recent or long-term, can become disillusioned and discouraged with the lack of opportunities or progress, causing them to lose their self-belief and aspirations. Recent research looking at barriers to employment for women with a visual impairment⁵ highlighted both lowered confidence due to limited options or lack of suitable equipment and also negative employer attitudes as key barriers. Research has also found that most employers have limited or no knowledge about how blind or visually impaired persons perform routine job tasks⁶.

According to the 'Rethinking Disability at Work' report produced by the Centre for Social Justice⁷, 1 in 5 employers say they would be less likely to employ a person with a disability. Many employers have perceived barriers such as fear of the cost or inconvenience of making reasonable adjustments, with only a quarter aware of the support provided by the Government programme Access to Work.

More than two million people are estimated to be living with significant sight loss in the UK today⁸, which has an impact on their lives. In Liverpool City Region, there are over 51,000 with sight loss and almost 10,000 of these are of working age⁹. Many have distinctive experience, skills and strengths, so there are significant gains to be made for the Region if it can develop effective ways to engage VIs in its workplaces, allowing them to achieve their full potential.

4. Strands of project

Bridge the Gap set out to work with 24 VIs to develop a comprehensive model to address three key themes:

- a) Low confidence in people with a visual impairment
- b) Lack of opportunities for suitable training, volunteering or employment
- c) Limited understanding of employers about employing VIs

The project included the following strands:

[1] Identify and address unmet employability needs of VIs

- Individual coaching to identify skills, address barriers and improve coping strategies
- Peer to peer mentoring with other VIs to share skills and provide support
- Harness existing skills of Bradbury Fields' clients to provide training on digital technology
- Employability workshops, improving communication skills and interview techniques
- Engagement with employers through workshops and attending business events to develop relationships
- Support and training for VIs to create their own promotional video to send to employers
- Identify training opportunities or apprenticeships for specific jobs

[2] Collaborate with partners to create opportunities

- Highlight case studies of employers who employ people with a disability and people with a disability running their own business
- Host event with strategic business partners to highlight good practice, support and technology available and enable visually impaired people to showcase their skills to employers.

[3] Develop strategy for future action

- Combine results from evaluation of above work with existing practice and resources to produce strategy.
- Highlight transferable principles for benefit of other Visionary members.

4.1 Options for VIs

Over the course of the year, 28 people with an interest moving towards employment, training or volunteering were referred to Bridge the Gap. The group included 10 women and 18 men, covering an age-range between 18 and 63. Of these, 25 were referred by Bradbury Fields (mainly from Liverpool and Knowsley) and 3 from Wirral Society.

In each case, people were invited to an initial familiarisation meeting with Jill Barlow from Jigsaw Coaching CIC to discuss the project and support available. The options were:

- a) Individual coaching sessions or advice and mentoring sessions
- b) Monthly group workshops
- c) Networking and employer events
- d) Engagement with employers

As far as possible, the individual sessions and the group meetings were delivered in a flexible manner to meet the differing needs of participants. For those with other commitments, appointments were held on different days or times to enable them to take part. Most of the sessions and meetings were held at Bradbury Fields or Wirral Society, as familiar venues for the participants.

Of the people who were referred, two did not respond to the initial contact – in each case, a message was left three times and then no further contact was initiated, and the person who made the original referral was informed. Five others had a few meetings or phone calls and then did not respond to any further invitations for an appointment or to attend a workshop. They were invited to take part in the independent evaluation (see section 6) to determine if there were any reasons for this or whether anything could have been done differently. One participant had to withdraw from the project for a while due to health reasons but took part in later workshops and meetings.

The length of engagement varied between participants – some engaged with the coaching and/or workshops for the whole year, some for part of the year. Some decided not to continue with the project, as they preferred to stay with the volunteering options they had already arranged.

4.1(a) Individual coaching sessions

Some participants opted to have regular coaching sessions to help them explore their interests and define goals to focus on. They were also given the opportunity to talk about any blocks and barriers they had experienced and encouraged to consider ways to deal with them.

The range of topics that were discussed was broad-ranging – some participants were coming to terms with their sight loss and were still adjusting in various aspects of their life. Others may have been more accustomed to their situation but also had had experiences which undermined their confidence and tended to focus on what they were not able to do, rather than what they were capable of doing.

Key themes that came up with several VIs included lack of confidence, a tendency towards self-criticism, experiences that had knocked their self-belief and low awareness of their innate skills and strengths.

Coaching is not suitable for everyone, but several of the VIs responded very well to the regular sessions, finding it beneficial to talk in a neutral, confidential space. They appreciated being able to talk at length about times that had been challenging for them, and also to identify areas they were managing well.

Although the project had an overall focus on employability, the sessions were not limited to work-related issues – participants also discussed wider issues, both recent and historic, which had affected their life or had impacted their confidence. People who have been unemployed for a while often have low confidence and can feel stuck in their life, with lack of self-belief preventing them taking up opportunities which could lead to employment. If they can address some of these beliefs with someone they feel they can trust, they may feel more able to engage in volunteering, training or applying for jobs.

Although some participants were very keen to find employment - for financial reasons, to find a new direction or gain a sense of purpose - they were encouraged as part of Bridge the Gap to think about the types of work that would suit them and their skills, rather than go for any job. Identifying the right types of occupation and environments where they would flourish would be more likely to increase their self-awareness and make the process of applying for jobs more enjoyable. This included reflecting on previous work experiences which helped them identify their skills, abilities and strengths.

The [JLA skills cards](#) developed by John Lees to supplement his book '[How to Get a Job You Love](#)' were very helpful in this process, with participants

assessing their rating on 79 skills and participants as 'Very competent'; 'Competent'; 'Adequate for the task' and 'Undeveloped'. They were also encouraged to get feedback from others, including friends and family to gain a different perspective on their strengths and skills.

4.1(b) Advice and mentoring sessions

Some of the VIs preferred to meet with Jill for more general advice and mentoring sessions, with signposting and practical suggestions on how to progress. These sessions were less regular, held as requested to meet specific needs.

People were offered help in the following areas:

- Sources of support to help with particular issues
- Identify sources of training
- Support to develop or update a CV
- Write a job application
- Mock interviews

One of the participants identified dyslexia as a problem for them and followed up information on local dyslexia support groups to access an assessment and support meetings. Others were informed about organisations close to them offering opportunities for volunteering and or training relevant to their interests.

Two VIs were interested in finding out more about training to be a counsellor, so Jill put them in touch with a self-employed blind counsellor to talk about their training and experiences in running a business. Neither of the VIs decided to do the training due to the time commitment, but both benefited from learning about the experiences of someone who had pursued this career option.

Two VIs agreed to co-present a workshop on Bridge the Gap with Jill at the Visionary national conference in November 2019, and they were supported in preparing a presentation about their experiences and the potential impact the project could make on employment issues for people with a visual impairment. This gave them valuable work experience to add to their CVs.

4.1(c) Group workshops

The group workshops enabled the VIs to get together and share their experiences, and many of the participants benefited from the peer support, as well as gaining knowledge or skills. The workshops helped people feel part of the project, and the regular meetings helped to enable people get to know each other, improving their social connections.

The workshops covered different employability topics, in response to requests by the participants and where possible, the workshops were hosted by a VI who was already in employment or running their own business. This provided an introduction to good role models with direct experience discussing some of the hurdles they had overcome to gain employment.

Topics covered included:

(1) Digital Technology

- **Workshop on improving digital technology skills** – provided by a VI who runs his own IT business. The first session gave a general overview and then answered queries about using mobile phones such as saving reminders or navigation. People also shared their own tips and solutions with each other, which helped to build confidence.
- Invite to ongoing monthly '**Tech Talks**' run by same trainer, to gain knowledge and increase confidence in using IT equipment and apps.
- **Tech for Life** – equipment exhibition run by Bradbury Fields and Sight Loss Learning Hub

(2) Mental health

- **Managing My Mental Health** – run twice, first one by a coach and psychotherapist, second one led by the group
- **Building self-confidence** – facilitated by VI running his own communication business
- **Emotional support Group** – set up by one of the participants as a self-help group

(3) Employment support

- **Advice on getting and retaining a job** – Employment Advisor at RNIB covering communication skills and disclosing a disability
- **Mock interviews** – with employer providing feedback afterwards
- **Self-employment** – run by self-employed VI

4.1(d) Networking events

Opportunities were provided for a small group to attend **networking events**, to meet with employers and people from other organisations in relevant fields. These were more suitable for six of the participants who already had a sense of the direction they wanted to pursue and felt confident enough to attend.

One was a combined event, run by Liverpool's Council for Voluntary Services together with Liverpool and Sefton's Chamber of Commerce, which included people from a wide range of organisations. The other, a LinkedIn Local meeting for small businesses, was organised in small groups, intended to facilitate communication for newcomers and was attended by two of the VIs.

Four VIs were supported to develop or update their CV and attend a **Jobs Fair** offering retail jobs in Liverpool. This gave them the opportunity to talk to employers about their skills. Three were offered interviews as a result.

4.1(e) Engagement with employers

VIs involved in the project had several opportunities to meet with employers including those who delivered the workshops - at a jobs fair, through mock interviews and at networking events. A large local employer offered to provide mock interviews in March, but this was postponed due to the COVID-19 outbreak.

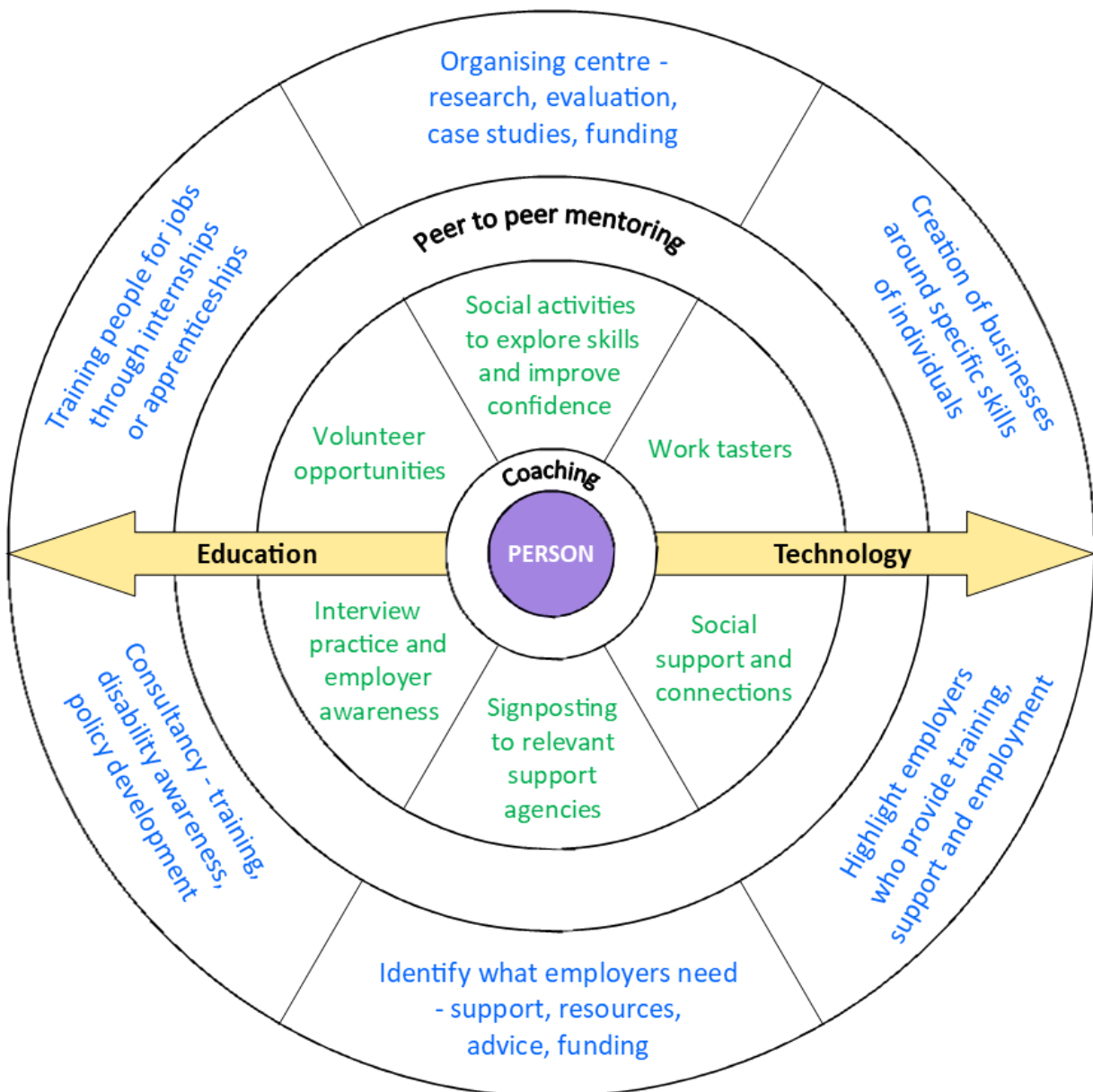
The level of engagement with employers was less than had been initially anticipated, as the project was designed around the needs of the participants. Some were still developing their ideas about the type of work they were looking for or did not feel very confident in promoting themselves to employers. Instead, the focus of the project was more on building skills and improving self-belief. Also supporting individuals with job applications, providing mock interviews for those who were job ready, and helping others to find suitable training courses.

Jigsaw Coaching has been awarded further funding from the European Social Fund for another project (Navigating Your Future) to support VIs wanting to move towards employment, and there are some opportunities to continue working with some of the Bridge the Gap participants. This will include engagement with employers as far as possible under the current circumstances.

4.1(f) Model used in Bridge the Gap

The strands in the project were part of a model developed by Jigsaw in 2018, on how to create opportunities for those with diverse needs, with input from Phil Longworth from Bradbury Fields and other members of the strategic 'Employment Solutions' group.

Bridge the Gap used the themes in the first three rings, with plans for further work to explore the themes in the outer ring in the future.



5. Employer Engagement Event

This event was the culmination of the project and was effective in creating a forum where VIs, employers, politicians, strategic thinkers and other parties could consider the challenges facing both VIs and employers, and to find practical, collaborative solutions to address them in Liverpool City Region.

It was designed to showcase the diverse skills and tenacity of VIs and also to highlight some of the practical, financial and technical support available to employers. Held at Liverpool Football Club's iconic Anfield stadium and hosted by LFC Foundation through their links with Merseyside Sight Loss Council, it set out to unpick some of the myths surrounding employing VIs.

Information about the event was distributed through contacts and networks of the organising team to reach as many employers as possible, as well as strategic thinkers in Liverpool City Region. The speakers included key business leaders and regional politicians, as well as successful VIs in employment giving their stories.

It was also important to the participants of Bridge the Gap, providing them with a chance to voice their concerns and share their experiences. For some, the feeling of being part of the project encouraged them to attend the event, which they may not have done otherwise.

The finale of the event was Chris McAusland, a Liverpool-born rising star, who spoke about his employment history, leading up to his success at stand-up comedy.

5(a) Key speakers

Welcome and introduction	Chaired by Roger Phillips DL – Trustee of Bradbury Fields and Radio Merseyside presenter
Business perspective	Paul Cherpeau – CEO of Liverpool & Sefton Chambers of Commerce
VI perspective	District Judge Afzal OBE* – Ministry of Justice (first blind Asian judge in UK)
Inclusive business	Garth Dallas – Chair, Liverpool Commonwealth Association, Head of Collaborations, Good Business Festival and discrimination law expert
Panel discussion: Political, employer and VI viewpoints	Saima Ashraf* – Senior Auditor, Merseyside Police (first blind person to complete the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy qualification)

Keith Dickinson – Director of Resources and Chief Finance Officer, Merseyside Police

Councillor Pauline Sinnott, Deputy Portfolio Holder for Education, Employment & Skills, Liverpool City Region (on behalf of Steve Rotherham, Metro Mayor of Liverpool City Region)

Jayne Martin, Disability Employment Adviser Lead, Department for Work and Pensions, Liverpool

Conclusions

Phil Longworth* CEO, Bradbury Fields

Finale

Chris McAusland*

(denotes person with visual impairment)*

5(b) Workshop

Delegates were placed on ten tables with a mix of people from different backgrounds and experience, including employers, VIs and other guests, to encourage discussion and debate. Each table was assigned an experienced facilitator, to ensure that everyone felt able to speak and share their thoughts.

Aims of the Workshop

1. To start a dialogue identifying issues around employing VI jobseekers
2. To find solutions that will enable employers and VI jobseekers to challenge pre-existing myths
3. To present the outcomes to the wider Bridge the Gap audience

The questions for the workshop were:

- **What are the top 3 challenges for VI people?**
- **What are the top 3 challenges for employers?**
- **How do we fix it? Give 3 key actions**

The responses for the workshop questions have been combined and presented in Appendix 1 (page 24) and the main points have been included in Section 7c (page 20). The evaluation of the event is presented in Appendix 2 (page 27).

6. Impact of project on VIs

The intended impact of the project included the following:

- a) More VIs in employment in Liverpool City Region, improving their financial situation and contributing to the local economy
- b) Improved awareness of employers of the skills and strengths that VIs can demonstrate, and available support
- c) Changed attitudes towards offering employment to people with a disability
- d) Strategic plan with support of key partners

In a project with people at such different stages on their journey towards employment, it was important that employment was not the only outcome that was measured. Other factors that may move someone closer to work or addresses barriers in the way also need to be considered.

In order to determine the effect that the project had on the participants, the following measures were used. Findings from the independent evaluation are included (all responses from the evaluation are in Appendix 3, page 33).

6(a) Job outcomes

Five of the participants who engaged with the project were successful in obtaining a job and 7 others became job-ready, actively applying for jobs following coaching. Three were exploring options such as training or volunteering which would help them improve skills and help them to identify suitable work, with one deciding to train as a coach. The remaining 6 decided that they wanted to focus on volunteering and not seek further employment.

One VI felt the coaching sessions had helped them in getting more job-ready:

‘Good to get together and see things from different angles. Helps to prepare to look for jobs i.e. how to project yourself, not your VI status’

6(b) Improvements in self-confidence and coping strategies

Many of the VIs improved their self-confidence through the coaching sessions and groups meetings and gained a greater sense of their own worth. This was observed by increased involvement in group meetings and willingness to try new volunteering opportunities or apply for different jobs.

It was partly from being able to reframe previous negative experiences in a more positive light, but also from the peer-support provided by the group workshops. The groups also helped people to recognise the value of their own coping strategies and to share them with each other.

In the evaluation, over three fifths of respondents (10 out of 16) rated the impact on their self-confidence as 4 or 5 out of 5 (section (i), p. 39). Over two thirds (11 out of 16) rated the impact on their coping strategies as 4 or 5 (section (ii), p. 40). One person commented:

‘Helps to appreciate you are not on your own’

The opportunity to take part in sailing was mentioned to the group as a sociable sporting activity that promotes team-building and helps to improve confidence and problem-solving skills. They were given the contact details of an established group in Merseyside - UK North Blind Sailing Association (UKNBSA) who sail with Royal Mersey Yacht Club (RMYC).

There was a lot of interest in trying sailing, including several people who said they would never have considered it but were encouraged by their sense of connection to the group. It has not been possible to try it this year due the impact of COVID-19, but connections with UKNBSA were established and podcasts about the sailing have been shared to provide more information. This will be followed up when the sailing starts again.

6(c) Improved resilience

The coaching sessions allowed people to talk openly about situations which they had found difficult, and also to identify areas they were managing well. The process helped them to recognise their skills and strengths, which promoted their feelings of resilience.

Several of the VIs became more able to change their perspective on situations they had previously found difficult, recognising the coping strategies they had developed. This process helped them to manage other situations more effectively. Support from other VIs also involved in the project helped to reinforce this, as they felt more able to share their experiences with others.

In the evaluation, over three fifths rated the impact on their levels of resilience as 4 or 5 (section (iii), p. 40), but the comments highlighted that several of them consider themselves resilient anyway.

6(d) Greater awareness and connection with sources of support, information and training

VIs were given information on various sources of information and support including:

- VI self-employed counsellor to discuss about training and opportunities
- Coach trainer to find out about training to be a coach
- Contact with local mental health support group, to explore possibilities of a career in this field
- Connection to other employability programmes including 'Ways to Work' and 'Work and Health', which can provide a personalised package of training, volunteering and job search support
- Introduction to local employers
- Attendance at a jobs fair, helping them in advance to prepare a CV and think about types of jobs

There were 14 responses to the question about connection with support sources and information (section (iv), p. 41) and over 70% gave a rating of 4 or 5. However, one participant felt there had not been much of a link for them. Another felt there could have been more direction in helping people decide what training to pursue to become more employable.

6(e) Reduced feelings of isolation through peer support and skill sharing

Coaching and advice meetings helped people to open up about their feelings of isolation, and they were encouraged to join the group meetings where possible. Those who took part in other activities such as the jobs fair or networking activities also had the chance to meet other project participants. All were informed about the opportunities to join social activities, interest groups and volunteering through Bradbury Fields, if they weren't already aware of them.

This gave people the chance to share their workplace experiences, frustrations of being unemployed and coping strategies, which helped them to feel more connected with each other. Of the 15 participants who responded to the evaluation (section (v), p. 41), 60% rated the connection to peers as 4 or 5 out of 5.

'Being able to share experiences with others and continue to be a listening ear when peers need this. As a blind community we often understand each other's needs in ways that the non-blind community wouldn't understand'

6(f) Greater awareness of available digital technology and improved skills

The meeting on digital technology was effective in showing people how they could use their phones in different ways, and group members have helped each other further since then. The VI facilitator who has his own IT support business also offered personal support to three participants and invited the group to attend his monthly Tech Talks, which are a forum for VIs to find out more information on digital technology and get their queries answered.

In section (vi) of the evaluation (p. 43), it was highlighted that some participants wanted more help with IT, and one said they needed demonstrations from employers on their IT systems. This area will be addressed in the follow-on project, with details of further training available passed on to Bridge the Gap participants.

6(g) Greater understanding of employers and how to interact with them

The engagement with employers was greater for some participants than others, as some had taken up the chance to take attend the jobs fair and networking events. Some did not feel ready to engage with employers at that point. As the group included people at a different level, it was difficult to find a solution that would suit everyone within the year.

Feedback in the evaluation (section (vii) p. 44) and showed that the project helped some participants in interacting with employers, but others felt more opportunities were needed. In section (f) (p. 37), feedback on the Engagement Event was very positive for most of the 20 respondents, but several said that they would have liked more contact with a wider range of employers.

In the follow-on employment project (Navigating Your Future), engagement with employers will be an important strand, based on the feedback from Bridge the Gap.

6(h) Production of personal promotional video to send to employers

This option was offered to the group towards the end of the project, once people had built up their confidence and sense of what sort of employment they wanted. A few indicated they would be interested in trying to create a video. However, the meeting time was taken up by preparations for the Bridge the Gap event in February, and the video sessions didn't take place.

The people who said they would like to be recorded are now engaged in the follow-on project, and this will offer the chance to produce a personal video.

7. Conclusions and Discussion

Recent figures show that over three quarters of VIs of working age in the UK are unemployed², despite the significant impact of digital technology. This was at a time of high levels of employment and with support for employers available from the RNIB or Government programmes such as Access to Work. It's important to explore the factors responsible for this to enable VIs to engage fully in the workplace, and it is even more urgent now with increased unemployment as a result of COVID-19.

A great deal was learnt during the year-long Bridge the Gap project in developing personalised programmes for VIs in Liverpool City region in order to improve their employment prospects. A combination of coaching, targeted training and peer-group support has helped many of the VIs make good progress on their journey towards a meaningful vocation or role, although it is clear that the project worked better for some of the participants than others.

Bridge the Gap was a pilot project, examining new ways of engaging with VIs and involving various partners. It made progress on the key themes of lack of confidence in VIs, lack of opportunities for training, volunteering and employment and limited understanding of employers, and it also highlighted where other work is needed.

It had a wide focus, using a combination of approaches to address general health and wellbeing issues of participants as well as employment, providing appropriate support from various sources. Increased confidence, motivation and expanding social connections are important in helping people become job-ready and along with training or volunteering can be key stepping stones on the way to employment.

The combination of focused support for individual VIs and a high profile strategic event, featuring the experiences of the VIs and the perspectives of employers, had an effective impact. The findings are already being used to inform and develop other initiatives in Liverpool City Region to enable VIs to obtain satisfying work, benefitting employers with their characteristic adaptability and resilience.

It is now imperative that the key lessons are shared and acted upon more widely to create a more inclusive society to benefit all.

‘Our vision is that Blind and Partially Sighted people will live in a world which does not discriminate against them, and which enables them to achieve their potential by being able to contribute to the social and economic fabric of their local communities’

Roger Phillips (Trustee of Bradbury Fields)

7(a) Key learnings

- As Bridge the Gap was a pilot project with a limited budget, there was one main person to carry out the coaching, co-ordinate the training and networking, liaise with employers to meet with individual VIs and to organise the engagement event with partners. This meant that some VIs didn't feel that the project met their needs or provided them with the opportunities they had been seeking. Future projects may benefit from an expanded team with more resources, connected to other agencies with more established links to employers such as Ingeus and Growth Company.
- Although feedback was sought at all stages of the project by the main contact, more detail was given to the independent evaluators. It would be beneficial to engage the evaluators at earlier stages to ensure the support provided meets the needs of participants and to make changes where required.
- It is important that mental health support is available as this was a common theme amongst many of the participants. It would be valuable to develop stronger connections with specialised sources of mental health support to address impact of sight loss, together with mental health issues relating to unemployment.
- The Employer Engagement Event provided a unique opportunity for discussions to take place between VIs, employers and other partners, allowing each to hear other perspectives and joining together to create suggestions for the way forward. This is highlighted in some of the comments from the evaluation of the event (p. 27):

'I was impressed by the variety of people at the event
and the ideas that arose from it'

'Inspirational - anything is possible and recognised
how solution-focused Blind and Partially Sighted people
are in their everyday lives, which would be an asset
in most employment situations'

'Hearing the stories from the VI speakers. Some incredible
strength, and no shortage of humour in each story'

7(b) Transferable principles of Bridge the Gap

1. Person-centred, with a range of options for support available as well as flexibility in time and location of appointments.
2. Individual coaching sessions, providing a safe and non-judgemental environment to explore barriers and negative beliefs, reinforce positive experiences and challenge assumptions.
3. Useful for participants to have one main contact, with connections to other services and support agencies.
4. Some people benefit from a more structured approach, with regular meetings and support in setting goals, developing an action plan and challenging themselves to step outside their comfort zone.
5. Value of group meetings with others in a similar situation to provide suitable training and share experiences.
6. Peer group support allows participants to develop social connections, provide motivation for job searches and signposting to other relevant contacts and services.
7. Help people identify the type of work and environment that would suit them and use their skills and abilities.
8. Value of being embedded in a base with social, networking and volunteering opportunities such as Bradbury Fields.
9. Benefits of running a high profile event like the Employer Engagement Event - it gave everyone a focal point to aim for at the end of the year.
10. Gain commitment and partnership from other organisations such as Department of Work and Pensions, local job centres, community groups, City Region and Council.

7(c) Workshop feedback

Key challenges for VIs:

The feedback from the workshop (Appendix 1, p. 24) highlighted four main challenges for VIs and four for employers:

- **Lack of opportunity** (such as work experience, interview practice or networking with employers);
- **Limited personal confidence** (such as in self-advocacy, lack of motivation due to fear of benefit loss, concern about traveling to workplaces);

- **Lack of knowledge** (about Access to Work, amount to disclose about disability or how to sell yourself);
- **Lack of support or problems with systems** (such as equipment not available, complex application processes or information in wrong format).

Key challenges for employers:

- **Lack of knowledge or awareness** (about needs of VIs, equipment available, how to make recruitment more accessible);
- **Fear factor** (reluctant to ask for advice or support, fear of change, worry about risk of tribunals, concern about getting it wrong);
- **Lack of support** (not aware of Access to Work, not enough education or training and not knowing where to access it);
- **Society/culture** (including prejudice, assumptions about what's involved, concern about claim culture)

How do we fix it?

- **Promote models of good practice** (identify role models – both VI and organisations who employ VIs, increase knowledge of digital technology);
- **Sort out the systems** (more accessible recruitment systems, get commitment from senior management, embed 'Disability Confident' at both personal and organisational level);
- **Support for individuals** (empower VIs through education, provide support systems, offer coaching/mentoring, host business festivals or career fairs accessible to VIs, provide workplace opportunities);
- **Collaboration** (co-production involving all stakeholders, build on previous dialogue and invite others to take part, focus on solutions);
- **Increased societal awareness** (awareness campaign on TV, online and social media, promote disability awareness training and embed 'Lived Experience Commissioners' into decision-making process);
- **Support for employers** (provide education to improve awareness and confidence, make 'Disability Confident' scheme accountable, collect and promote evidence that it pays to employ people with a disability).

8. Recommendations

- 8.1 Engage with employers, provide practical information and support (e.g. recruitment process) and highlight role models.
- 8.2 Promote examples of good practice in UK and other countries.
- 8.3 Link with regional/national business festivals and host VI-specific career fairs to highlight opportunities for VIs and demonstrate skills to employers.
- 8.4 Clarify employer queries such as insurance cover and promote schemes such as Access to Work and Disability Confident.
- 8.5 Highlight business benefits of employing VIs including economic, legal and moral.
- 8.6 Provide effective and individualised education of VIs, together with ongoing support for both getting into employment and once in a job.
- 8.7 Provide clear guidance on how VIs can access apprenticeships to gain skills whilst at work and effective support for those who wish to become self-employed.
- 8.8 Ensure VIs and businesses are aware of the Access to Work programme and who to contact to ensure its efficiency and effectiveness.
- 8.9 Invest in Disability Confident and monitoring of it, including visits to employers and highlighting examples of action and best practice. Promote achievements of employers who commit to scheme.
- 8.10 Explore the possibilities of job carving, following the example of the [Empower Job Carving programme](#) in Knowsley where a work placement is created around the needs of the individual and the business, and can lead to a longer term position.

9. Acknowledgements

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Appendix 1: Workshop responses from Engagement Event

[A] Challenges for people who are blind or partially sighted

1. Lack of opportunity

- Not enough work experience
- Lack of interview techniques and experience
- Insufficient pre-employment opportunities (e.g. access to volunteering)
- Insufficient career advice
- Educational institutions not entry level qualification
- Education (Maths, English)
- Employers are worried so they go 'safety first'
- Lack of patience from others
- Not enough opportunities for people to network or sell themselves
- Prejudice
- People making assumptions about how many VIs use braille

2. Personal confidence

- Confidence to self-advocate
- Limited motivation due to benefit-trap
- Lack of confidence
- Travelling to the workplace

3. Lack of knowledge

- Lack of information about Access to Work
- Not sure how to sell yourself to employers and ask for what you need without highlighting barriers
- VIs unsure how much information to give to employers and when

4. Lack of support or problems with systems available

- No support where needed
- Suitable equipment not always available at the right time
- Application process and format of application forms
- Information in the right format
- Equalities Act can work against VIs – can be too stringent
- Video interviews

[B] Challenges for Employers

1. Lack of knowledge or awareness

- Unaware of equipment, reasonable adjustments, adaptations and support
- No experience of Access to Work
- Lack of role models within company

- Education - what is available, how effective, assistance with costs
- How to make the recruitment process relevant for BPS
- Lack of understanding and awareness of needs of VIs

2. Fear factor

- Scared to ask and don't know the questions to ask
- Wary of increased support and costs
- Worried about getting it wrong
- Cautious in dealing with the unknown
- Fear of facing change
- Risk of employment tribunals
- Employers don't feel 'disability confident', even if the organisation is

3. Lack of support

- Delays in getting support through Access to Work
- Lack of appropriate education and training

4. Society/culture

- Claim culture
- Unwillingness to accept change
- Perception of added difficulty
- Assumptions about limitations
- Perception of too much red tape
- Internalised prejudice
- Size of organisation
- No 'pipeline' of talent

[C] How do we fix it?

1. Models of good practice

- Identify and utilise role models
- Digital technology
- Organisations who employ VIs to lead by example
- Role modelling
- VIs to take ownership

2. Sort out the systems

- Make systems accessible (accessibility checks and testing before procurement)
- 'Disability Confident' might be needed at a personal and institutional level
- Remove disabilities question from application forms
- Increase 'Disability Confident' awareness and sign-up
- Get buy-in from senior management

3. Support for individuals

- Empower VIs through the state systems – state education and career advice
- Better support systems (consistent national pathway)
- Coaching and mentoring
- More face to face interviews
- More networking events for BPS
- More business festivals and careers fairs which are accessible for VIs
- Organisations should highlight gaps that could be filled
- VI person to explain which format works for them
- Internships, tasters, trial systems, work opportunities
- Access to work or support in finding work

4. Collaboration

- Co-production involving all stakeholders
- Build on dialogue – invite more
- Training RNIB bringing in everyone
- Dialogue – businesses & public
- Communication – how (question, practical)
- Solution-focus

5. Increase societal awareness

- Awareness campaign – TV, online gov.uk, Social media
- Legislation
- Embed ‘Lived Experience Commissioners’ into decision-making process
- Disability awareness training for everyone
- Increased low vision awareness by people with low vision
- Consultation with VI people
- Change of culture

6. Support for employers

- Increase confidence, education, awareness, help with policies
- Make Disability Confident scheme accountable
- Awareness of where costs of any adjustments will come from
- Highlighting Access to Work - needs a publicity campaign
- Employers aware of genuine case studies
- DWP working with employers to establish work trials
- Make the argument that it pays financially

Appendix 2: Evaluation of Engagement Event

1. Overall, how did you rate the event?

(from 18 responses)

Excellent	Very good	Neutral	Not very good	Poor
10 (56%)	7 (39%)	1 (6%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)

Comments:

- Well organised, good mix of attendees, some great stories, and really uplifting. We have taken away a number of actions to work on.
- Great to hear from people with VI as to their needs and perspective.
- Great speakers and made some good connections. Appeared to be missing good representation from employers.
- Great mix of people on the table. Inspirational speakers were fantastic. Nice touch to finish with the comedian. Very organised. Bacon butties fab!
- It was a fantastic networking event, bringing various organisations together, in order to support people living with sight loss.
- Focused well on the employment needs for people with VI. Gave time for individuals to take an active part as well as organisations.
- I think the event was fantastic from a visually impaired persons point of view. Any event which raises awareness to employers of the need of VIP is a brilliant thing. However, the event wasn't really structured in order for the VIP's to explore and experience some of the assistive technology solutions which were being demonstrated. So, for that reason the event wasn't really a success for myself or the other AT distributors in attendance.
- A great event bringing together a fantastic group of people with all levels of experience. For the next event consider bringing in working people at not such professional levels so we can see success at all levels of the working market. That said it was still very inspirational to hear from such successful people. The working group created many ideas - would be good to see the action plan and outcomes to see what actually has changed.
- Inspirational - anything is possible and recognised how solution-focused Blind and Partially Sighted people are in their everyday lives, which would be an asset in most employment situations.
- The room probably wasn't ideal in terms of lighting, speaker facilities but apart from that everything was great.

2. Please rate the following aspects of the event:

<i>From 18 responses</i>	Excellent	Very good	Neutral	Not very good	Poor
Venue	8 (44%)	7 (39%)	3 (17%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Location	8 (47%)	7 (41%)	2 (12%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Refreshments	11 (65%)	5 (29%)	1 (6%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Speakers	14 (82%)	3 (18%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Workshop	8 (47%)	7 (41%)	2 (12%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)

Comments:

‘As noted on the previous question, it was an excellent event with a good mix of time spent on different aspects. Location wasn’t the easiest place to get to but certainly not the worst...’

‘Finding venue was easy! Directions into building could have been better. I circumnavigated the ground before getting in. Breakfast was unexpected but very welcome’

‘Outstanding speakers, great bacon butties, but workshop lacked clarity’

‘There was a terrific energy around the room’

‘Everything was well planned. The panel of speakers were excellent and a real inspiration’

3. What inspired you?

‘The speakers’ achievements and then also the people on our table who brought it down to earth on the everyday struggle’

‘All the speakers and VI participants in the audience’

‘Interest in knowing what's available for individuals who face barriers entering the employment world’

'The variety of people at the event and the ideas that arose from it'

'The speakers – they were amazing!!'

'Hearing the stories from the VI speakers. Some incredible strength, and no shortage of humour in each story'

'The variety of experiences from VIP in employment. The job roles, backgrounds, education etc. The spectrum was covered well'

'Saima, the judge, Chris. How everyone was willing to help each other'

How people overcame their challenges and how employers supported

'Inspirational guest speakers and a great concept'

'Learning from attendees; employers; agencies; individuals. Gave me a greater understanding of challenges and opportunities for people with VI'

'The care taken to put the event together demonstrated that there are people and organisations out there that actually care. It was uplifting'

'Sheer determination to achieve'

'The panel of speakers were excellent, giving their perspective and experience of working with a visual impairment. They were a true inspiration'

'Hearing the success stories from so many people'

4. What did you learn?

- Assistive tech is absolutely in demand and many employers don't even know it exists.
- That there are a lot of people willing to help you.
- That we still have some way to go before we can class ourselves as a world class, completely inclusive employer - but we are getting there.
- That anything is possible if you are really determined
- The lack of employment support VI people have in order to gain employment, this needs to change.
- How important it is to consider the needs of individuals and not just a homogenous group.
- Grants available to employers to assist taking with any adaptations that may be required
- Early days but have arranged follow-up meetings to explore how the models can be used elsewhere.
- About the support available
- Greater detail on what local authorities are able to achieve
- Improved awareness
- That visual impairment is such a big barrier.
- I was unaware of the assistance available to the Visually Impaired (and people with other disabilities). I can pass this information on now.
- I learned that although we may have limitations, obstacles can be overcome, no matter what the challenges may be!
- The need to listen to those who use services before designing them; to test before implementation; to understand everyone operating under restrictions.
- The difference between diversity and inclusion. That we should see the person for their capability and not their disability as a barrier. Being disability aware.
- Many people have had a long Journey through emotional adjustments before presenting themselves as ready for work
- It was very helpful to get first-hand accounts from people with visual impairments about what the workplace can be like.

5. What will you do differently as a result?

- Think about the way we can attract potential employees who have a VI. Also, we need to educate our managers into recognising how little adjustment most people with VI actually need versus the benefits from bringing in
- Take more notice of people's abilities, not disabilities
- Be more aware and mindful and I would love to support people with VI into employment
- Greater collaboration with VI providers and a more person centred approach.
- Not sure yet but hope to learn from the project and share with my Key Stakeholders.
- Increase recruitment
- Work more collaboratively with those I can
- Use in my day to day role
- Consider reaching out to people with disabilities to apply for roles at Engie.
- Inspire more visually impaired people to try and achieve whatever they can in life!
- Encourage co-production; checking ideas are workable and resourced
- Have an open day at my workplace bringing people with disability to the workplace so they can get a feel of the workplace.
- Encourage Employers and Blind and Partially Sighted people to talk honestly to jointly develop opportunities
- Advocate more than ever to employers that people with visual impairments can, and want to be, great employees.

6. Is there anything that should have been included?

- More time for the delegates and guests to experience the assistive technology.
- Audio description on the videos.
- I think it could have been a tad longer, and may be had some more details on about how as an employer, we can do more.
- Might have been useful to have examples of people from lower down the employment ladder, not just the highly successful people - more realism.
- More examples of how employers have supported VI people to stay in work and/or get into work.

- A continued network for the VI's and employers can communicate.
- Perhaps information regarding social events. I appreciate this event was all about improving work opportunities but lots of people with VI's are quite lonely.
- Everything was fantastic.
- The event was focussed and so was useful and long enough - more time does not always mean better outcomes.
- Speakers doing more routine types of employment roles.

7. Any other comments?

- A fantastic event. Bradbury Fields are a charity who are pushing boundaries and striving to create a more accessible and inclusive workplace for anyone with sight loss.
- Really excellent morning, one of the best I have ever attended.
- Great event all round.
- Just that I really enjoyed the event. Keep up the good work!!
- I would like to think that Bridge the Gap will be a regular occurrence. Well done!
- A great event, but the momentum must now be built upon and key impacts measured.
- It was a fantastic event highlighting in particular how fragmented support services can be. But very inspirational all the same! Thank you all!

Appendix 3: Independent evaluation

This was carried out by the Sight Loss Learning Hub, who had not been involved in the implementation of Bridge the Gap yet was known and trusted by the VIs participating in the project. They were phoned up to three times and asked their feedback on the services they had received in the project on a scale from 1 (lowest) to 5 (highest), and any comment. The results are summarised below.

(a) Coaching sessions – 16 respondents		
Response	Number	Comments
1	1 (6%)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I had a couple of coaching sessions, but I didn't like being moulded into something I am not
2	0	
3	2 (13%)	
4	4 (25%)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Good to get together to see things from different angles. Helps to prepare to look for jobs ie how to project yourself, not your VI status Informative and helpful
5	9 (56%)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The coaching was directional and coaxing, Jill enabled me to realise my potential. Postive and encouraging. Gave me ideas I hadn't thought of, and of what is out there. Really helpful for me. Good coaching. Jill always offered for me to choose where to meet which was helpful, although Bradbury Fields turned out to be a good meeting place. I can't do things that I used to. Jill encouraged me to download Zoom

(b) Advice sessions – 14 respondents		
Response	Number	Comments
1	0	
2	0	
3	2 (14%)	

4	4 (29%)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Very good, although knew some stuff already. Benefits advice was really good.
5	8 (57%)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Jill went out of her way and really persevered for me. • Good to see from both sides ie prospective employee and employer. Suggest to bring in Access to Work here, for info on equipment and how it is funded. • Really helpful. • Good, Jill did her best to offer advice. • Attended a couple of 1 to 1 sessions – advice and guidance around job interview preparation and another about trustee interview preparation. These were really useful, particularly since I had been experiencing difficulties around low self-esteem. • Jill makes you feel at ease. The coaching was positive and informative.

(c) Signposting – 9 respondents

Response	Number	Comments
1	0	
2	0	
3	1 (11%)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Noticed a lack of understanding of signposting, especially employers. Needs to be clearer on how to get people going in the right direction.
4	5 (56%)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Signposting was good, I could have looked harder myself. • Helpful to get signposting to coaching and counselling, it was influential.
5	3 (33%)	

(d) Group meetings – 16 respondents

Response	Number	Comments
1	0	•
2	0	•

3	3 (19%)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I didn't know who was talking - I found this difficult. I would have liked an opportunity to ask about how working affects PIP and a possible transfer to Universal Credit. • The nature of the meetings was not the most accessible as people were speaking all at once. Needed more structure.
4	5 (31%)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Good to realise you're not alone in difficulties. Really enjoyable. • Only attended the initial meeting at the beginning of the project and one session about mental wellbeing, both of which were useful. It would have been useful to give participants the opportunity to be signposted to ways of accessing 1 to 1 counselling/therapy if they required. As it's a well-known statistic that people with VI often have poor mental wellbeing. • Important
5	8 (50%)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Everyone had chance to speak. It was decent info shared, and I had help to use my iPhone better. The Mental Health course was brilliant, it gave you hope for future. • Very good but would appreciate more structure (agenda) and leadership to achieve successful meetings. Suggest to involve organisations such as Job Centre and Sodexo who are inclined to employ VI, to open up an honest dialogue. • The Mental Health group meeting was good. • Very informative, I was impressed with them, especially the one on mental health. Sometimes I can fail in groups because I tend to overpower people. • Useful to 'batter out' issues and help each other. • I didn't go to all the group meetings due to work commitments. • Top score for this.

(e) Job Fair – 4 respondents

Response	Number	Comments
1	1 (25%)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Good to promote myself but I was reliant on the woman who completed my questionnaire for me - she then told me I hadn't been successful, what could I do?
2	0	
3	0	
4	2 (50%)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The Job Fair was big, not much time to ask questions. Was positive, would have liked some focus on Easter and Summer opportunities.• Bit disappointed that seemed more aimed at employers than VI people - needed more representation of different employers (not just corporate). That said, could take good and bad and use accordingly.
5	1 (25%)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• It was good, just not suitable for me and not what I was looking for.

(f) Employers Engagement Event – 20 respondents

Response	Number	Comments
1	0	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•
2	0	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•
3	3 (15%)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• It was more like a conference for professionals and not appropriate for everyone. The break afterwards was good to mingle.• It was good to experience the theme of 'Respect'. I would have liked to meet a good representation of employers at this event.
4	4 (20%)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Very good.• Such a broad topic in such a short time. I would have liked more time to spend with employers.
5	13 (65%)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Absolutely brilliant. I hadn't wanted to go as it was out of my comfort zone, but it was really good for me.

		<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Enjoyable, would have preferred to have sessions split by breaks, and more time to ask questions. Would have liked more hands-on training of equipment.• It was well organised. My own technical ability hampered me.• It was nice to go to Anfield.• It was really informative and well laid out on the whole. I did feel though that the CEOs who spoke are not the people who actually hire employees. It would have been improved by having large print available. During the Q&A session people wanted to talk more, there seemed too little time.• Fantastic.• I would like to progress from my experience at the LFC event. It was good to sit and ask questions and hear from their side.• Good location and helpful volunteers once assigned to me. It was a lot to take in (benefits side etc) and I had to concentrate to keep hold of who was each Speaker• I couldn't hear everything. I have problems with Universal Credit and PIP so it was helpful to hear back from Debbie at the Job Centre.• This event opened my eyes to a lot of things, especially being new to sight loss. It made me feel how lucky I am as others have lost their sight a lot earlier. 3 speakers really stood out, I was wowed by the humour and the jokes. I was impressed by the woman who worked for Merseyside Police. I thought "If you can do your job with no eyesight then I need to do something with what I have."
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(g) If you decided not to take part in the project or stop your involvement, were there any reasons for this? – 9 respondents

Comments

- I went to a few sessions but stopped as I didn't want to go down the employment route at my stage in life.
- I became involved in the project at the very beginning, at this point I was experiencing a difficult period in my life and had low self-esteem. I wanted to understand why employers often hold negative attitudes around employing people who are blind and have other conditions. I also wanted to find new techniques and skills to help me put my current experiences to good use when applying for a new job. I was unable to continue my involvement in the project as much as I would have liked as I began a new job and went back to university. But as things didn't work out in my new job, I was able to re-engage towards the end.
- I didn't start the Project as my circumstances had changed.
- I didn't want to go back to work so I didn't start the project.
- I am not ready to partake but I have Jill's number stored in my phone for when I am.
- Jill was brilliant but I started full time work and Open University doing Sports Fitness Coaching.
- I worked for 18 years as a hairdresser and I miss it. I've been out of work for 2 years. I had spoken with Bradbury Fields who passed on Jill's number, but I didn't follow up with the project because the Job Centre referred me to a work and health programme that is difficult to get on to.
- I wasn't looking for work due to the risk of losing my benefits.

(h) Is there anything you think could have been done differently? – 21 respondents

Comments

- No (9 respondents)
- Only to improve on leadership to keep direction, and to achieve a good representation of people as VI and employers. More awareness about what specific skills are needed for jobs.
- I would have preferred talks and events to have been split by more breaks, with more time to ask questions. I would have like more hands-on training of equipment.
- No, it just wasn't for me. I enjoy volunteering and joining in the gym/swim sessions at Bradbury Fields.

- I haven't yet identified my own skill set, although I appreciate I missed sessions due to surgery.
- For the Job Fair, needed more representation of different employers (not just corporate)
- At the event I would have liked to meet a good representation of employers - there were no employers at all.
- It would have been really useful to have sessions about understanding and overcoming Access to Work issues – all too often there are difficulties communicating with Access to Work. What they will provide and what the employer has to contribute, what the employee is allowed to keep at the end of the job, etc. Needs assessments not portraying a full picture/ true account of the individuals' needs. Therefore, it would have been beneficial to perhaps work with Access to Work to provide advice and guidance on how these issues can be overcome.
- It would have been good to have more mock interviews. Also to have met more employers.
- Not really, no. The project tried to vary times of sessions to suit everyone.
- Future employers could come to speak to us, and not just about high level positions. Employers such as supermarkets and department stores could hear us on a one-to-one basis, about how we feel as individuals and focus on our barriers.
- I don't think so, it was a very good service.
- More interaction with us as people to find out who we are. I want to be noticed, and for employers to be less afraid of taking on VI people. Give me a chance!
- No, Jill was superb in texting me the times and details of sessions.

(i) Considering the following areas, what impact do you feel the Bridge the Gap project has had for you?

(i) Self-confidence – 16 respondents

Response	Number	Comments
1	0	
2	2 (13%)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I am self-confident in some ways.
3	4 (25%)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I am a bit more confident.
4	4 (25%)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Given me a boost. • Ability to apply for jobs and trustee position. • Helped me a lot.
5	6 (38%)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It helps to talk.

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Given me more confidence. • I am self-confident anyway, but the course did promote it. Some gained a lot of confidence. • I gained a lot of confidence and awareness. • Made me have a focus. People might be suffering with anything.
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(ii) Coping strategies – 16 respondents		
Response	Number	Comments
1	0	
2	2 (13%)	
3	3 (19%)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I tend to cope well anyway.
4	7 (44%)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Helps to appreciate you are not on your own. • In life you have to go through the negative times to appreciate what you've got.
5	4 (25%)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Very good. • I'm already quite capable in terms of my disability, but I now feel able to speak in public about something I know.

(iii) Levels of resilience – 16 respondents		
Response	Number	Comments
1	0	
2	2 (13%)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •
3	4 (25%)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I've always been resilient. Disillusionment and unhappiness will pass.
4	6 (38%)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I still get anxious starting anything new but I am working on this. • My resilience is good anyway. • In some jobs there's no equality.
5	4 (25%)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I am naturally resilient anyway. • Discussions help to build resilience • I know I can go back for support

(iv) Awareness of and connection with sources of support, information and training – 14 respondents

Response	Number	Comments
1	1 (7%)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> There wasn't much link to support, information and training.
2	1 (7%)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The Job Centre/DWP were very good in conveying how they wanted to help. However there was no-one from Access To Work.
3	2 (14%)	
4	4 (29%)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Could offer more direction in terms of supporting people to know what training is necessary to be employable. Eg Am I applicable to this job? Some people didn't get back to me, although I may have missed their calls. I connected with Maria, she suggested a lot. Jill suggested a lot including The Princes Trust.
5	6 (43%)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Many different contacts given eg sailing. There was a lot of good info. Jill made sure we knew where we could get help, or that we could ask her. Jill has a lot of information and is very resourceful. She is more than willing to pass everything on.

(v) Connection with peers to share skills and support – 15 respondents

Response	Number	Comments
1	0	
2	1 (7%)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Needs a lot more work and sharing of information. More input from organisations and more outward looking.
3	5 (33%)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Helpful to know everyone is the same. A lot of people were unemployed so we had time to share and support each other.

4	3 (20%)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Being able to share experiences with others and continue to be a listening ear when peers need this. As a blind community we often understand each other's needs in ways that the non-blind community wouldn't understand. • I wasn't really connected at first. At Knowsley Works I was offered some jobs that had disabilities in mind but they weren't for me.
5	6 (40%)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I made a couple of friends and I realised I wasn't alone. • Good connection at every meeting! Negatives were countered with positives. • I got great support from others. • I asked for people's numbers and would like to get in touch with others that were on the project. Amazing people!

(vi) Awareness of available digital technology and your skills in using it – 14 respondents

Response	Number	Comments
1	1 (7%)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I don't use much digital tech.
2	0	
3	4 (29%)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Good emphasis on IT being valuable at home and at work, but need more info and demonstrations from employer's on their own IT. Admits IT is also down to personal choice. • I would have liked more IT on the Project, with demonstrations eg advantages of an iPad over a laptop. • I'm struggling because my tech is not good and I'm struggling with it. I feel like giving up. I need more support on tech.
4	5 (36%)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I have no laptop, only iPhone. I didn't learn anything new.
5	4 (29%)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Tech event by Paul Ryan was good.

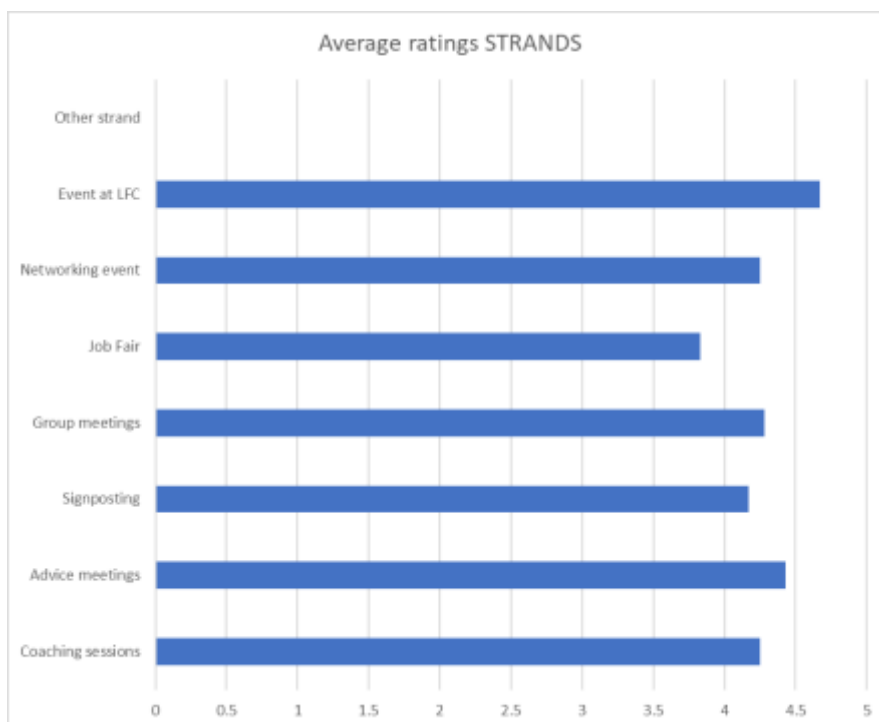
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A good few courses, always with info on how to get help • I got a lot from it, although I need more help. • I've got an 'A' game now for what I'm doing. I have confidence in what I'm saying.
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(vii) Understanding of employers and how to interact with them – 13 respondents		
Response	Number	Comments
1	0	
2	2 (%)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I felt there wasn't much availability with employers, there was no-one to speak to directly.
3	2 (%)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • My scoring here is no reflection on the course - I was not ready to engage with employers at that point. • Need more opportunities to get employers to see what people can do. • Employers seemed as apprehensive of us as we were of them. Need more development on both sides. Between us we should be able to overcome difficulties. • I have lost heart with employers - they are scared of VI people.
4	2 (%)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I did learn more on how to interact, even though I am already quite good at interacting.
5	2 (%)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The project helped me immensely. Anfield opened up a new perspective. Employers see barriers, it's up to me to prove I can overcome them. • I would have a good idea of how to interact with any employer. My viewpoint is that it all should be equal. Employers are not processing what kind of talent you've got. Their qualities are being overlooked.

(j) Please add any further comments about your experience of Bridge the Gap - 21 respondents

- I can't fault anything, Jill really went above and beyond on everything and it shows that she cares. Even transport was great. It was good to know I could opt out of certain strands (for me, the Job Fair) if it didn't suit me at the time. The networking event was brilliant!
- We all have to look outward, not inward. Need to be actively approaching employers to ask if they will employ VI people and be actively seeking roles. It needs to be a '2-pronged attack', involving the VI person and the employer. Would like to see standard Job Fair being inclusive of all disabilities (if this is not already the case). Mock interviews would be very useful, including how to make a great first impression and how to project yourself well - physical appearance does matter! Some VI people look like they are from a different world and separate themselves. We are not islands.
- The Project was very organised. Jill put in a lot of work and I am very grateful for the opportunity. My confidence is growing, and I would like some follow-up to help me progress.
- I found the Project interesting, but it just wasn't for me. I find confidence by being at Bradbury Fields.
- I felt unimportant in the scheme of the project. The sessions should have us in mind as individuals. I feel other people may have had more input.
- I have tried to implement and use everything I attended/experienced.
- It was great! Nice to meet Jill and the other people. Would like another Job Fair that is more representative of all types of employers.
- I would like to see more employers represented, not just professional positions.
- It was a great opportunity to be part of some aspects of this project. It should be run again, but perhaps focus on different age groups – those starting out on their careers (younger people, such as 20-30 age group) and a separate group for others. Would be great to have other guest speakers. Also, more opportunities needed to break down barriers with DWP and Access to Work.
- I'm grateful for the opportunity to have received support and advice with applications and interview technique – this was so valuable.
- I really enjoyed it and would love to be involved in any future groups, even help to run them.

- Everything was excellent, I had an amazing experience. It was great to meet people and share. I have almost completed a Coaching Course so I'm looking forward to picking that up again when the lockdown ends.
- Jill was a lovely woman. I am interested in attending another project, please contact me by the email address you already have for me.
- I have no comments about the project, it just wasn't for me.
- It was clear that Jill Barlow was indeed trying to 'bridge the gap' between employers and VI people. Just to say again that how we feel needs to go wide and be heard so employers can understand our barriers.
- I am open to project opportunities in the future.
- Jill's been brilliant. It's doing something for people that I want. I love speaking on the phone, even voluntary, to get me out of the house. I'd even work on a farm picking, living in a caravan, if I can take my dog.
- Jill has helped me develop my plans to give talks in schools. She's helped with posters. Bridge the Gap has been an eye opener for me. I'm always up for a challenge but I was low when I was first diagnosed. If you have a number of people around you then let them impact positively on your confidence - let them in, don't shut them out or shut yourself down.
- My ratings on this evaluation have been quite low - it felt to me like there wasn't enough time to cover everything and do the networking.
- I feel that if I got a job I'd lose my JSA. For this reason, I wouldn't be interested in a future job seeking project.



Average rating given by the participants to different strands of the evaluation.