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Estimates of the number of adults in the UK with learning disabilities and visual impairment

Research summary for the UK

Background

Although there is considerable research evidence that visual impairments are more common among people with learning disabilities, there is no national monitoring of the number of people with learning disabilities who have visual impairments. Neither is there robust epidemiological data on the prevalence of visual impairments in people with learning disabilities in the UK.

RNIB and SeeAbility therefore asked Professor Eric Emerson and Dr Janet Robertson of the Centre for Disability Research (CeDR) at Lancaster University to estimate the number of people with learning disabilities and sight difficulties in the UK using prevalence rates from a major study in the Netherlands.

This has given us for the first time, estimates of the population of people with learning disabilities and seeing difficulties (blindness, partial sight and refractive error) in each of the four countries of the UK.

Method

Emerson and Robertson presented two sets of estimates in their report, those based on the estimated population of adults with LD **known to** the statutory services, and a higher estimate of **all** people with learning disabilities. Because they had to estimate the 'true' prevalence of learning disabilities in the UK, and to use prevalence rates taken from the Netherlands to estimate the number of people with learning disabilities and visual impairment, Emerson and Robertson advise that there is a degree of uncertainty in these estimates. It is possible that the true figures are higher or lower than the figures presented in their report. Nevertheless, as they point out:

"...these are the best estimates available and *are* consistent with the results of smaller, UK studies. Additional, large-scale research undertaken in the UK would be of considerable benefit in providing more robust estimates with narrower confidence intervals".

Key findings for blindness and partial sight

- There are estimated to be over one million people in the UK with a learning disability
- Adults with learning disabilities are 10 times more likely to be blind or partially sighted than the general population
- An estimated **96,500** adults with learning disabilities (including **42,000** known to the statutory services) are blind or partially sighted
- The estimated prevalence of blindness and partial sight in the adult learning disabilities population is **9.3%**
 - This means that nearly one in 10 adults with learning disabilities is blind or partially sighted
- An estimated **40,600** people with learning disabilities aged 20 - 49 (including **25,390** known to the statutory services) are blind or partially sighted
- The estimated prevalence of blindness and partial sight in people with learning disabilities aged 20 - 49 is **6.5%**
 - This means that over 6 in 100 people with learning disabilities aged 20 - 49 are blind or partially sighted
- An estimated **10,480** people with learning disabilities aged 20 - 49 (including **7,570** known to the statutory services) are blind
- For people aged 20 - 49 the estimated prevalence of blindness in the learning disabilities population is **1.67%**
 - This means that over 16 in 1000 people with learning disabilities aged 20 - 49 are blind

Key findings for refractive error

- An estimated **579,000** adults with learning disabilities (including **122,000** known to the statutory services) have refractive error
 - This means that nearly 6 out of 10 people with learning disabilities need glasses
- An estimated **53,300** adults with learning disabilities (including **19,000** known to the statutory services) have **severe** refractive error
- An estimated **22,200** adults with learning disabilities have **severe myopia**

- This means that one in 50 adults with learning disabilities have **severe** short sightedness
- Of adults with learning disabilities who have refractive error, 2 in 5 have **severe** short sightedness
- An estimated **31,100** adults with learning disabilities have **severe hyperopia**
 - This means that three in 100 adults with learning disabilities have **severe** long sightedness
 - Of adults with learning disabilities who have refractive error, nearly 3 in 5 have **severe** long sightedness

Key health messages

There are about 1 million adults in the United Kingdom with a learning disability.

- People with learning disabilities are 10 times more likely to have serious sight problems than other people. People with severe or profound learning disabilities are most likely to have sight problems.
- People with learning disabilities may not know they have a sight problem and may not be able to tell people. Many people think the person with a learning disability they know can see perfectly well.
- 6 in 10 people with learning disabilities need glasses and often need support to get used to them.
- People with learning disabilities need to have a sight test every two years, sometimes more often. Regular sight tests and wearing glasses helps people stay healthy and get the most from life.

References

Emerson E and Robertson J (2011) **Estimated prevalence of visual impairment among people with learning disabilities in the UK**. Improving Health and Lives: Learning Disabilities Observatory report for RNIB and SeeAbility

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