

Key statistics about sight loss

R N I B

See differently



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Key statistics about sight loss updates the most important messages about the impact of blindness and partial sight in the UK.

Published in September 2021, the messaging in this document reflects the latest evidence, research and statistics available and dates and sources are outlined at the end. This information can be used to support a wide range of communications.

If you have any questions about how to use any of these facts or stats in your work, please contact RNIB's Insight Team at research@rnib.org.uk.

Demographics

More than two million people have sight loss

More than two million people are estimated to be living with sight loss in the UK. This level of sight loss is severe enough to have a significant impact on their daily lives [1, 2]. This would include having difficulty seeing objects at a



distance and the potential requirement to surrender a driving licence.

The more than two million people living with sight loss includes:

- people who are registered blind or partially sighted.
- people whose vision is better than the levels that qualify for registration.
- people who are awaiting or having treatment such as eye injections, laser treatment or surgery that may improve their sight.
- people whose sight loss could be improved by wearing correctly prescribed glasses or contact lenses.

Every day 250 people start to lose their sight

Every day 250 people start to lose their sight in the UK. This is equivalent to one person every six minutes [3].

This statistic includes sight loss as a result of AMD, glaucoma and diabetic retinopathy, and some of the other causes of permanent and irreversible sight loss in the UK. Many more people will start to live with sight loss as a result of uncorrected refractive error and cataract.

One in five people will live with sight loss in their lifetime

This is based on the assumption that the underlying risk factors associated with sight loss do not change. In addition, many more people will experience sight loss as a result of eye injury, cataract or refractive error [3].

More people will have sight loss in the future

The number of people in the UK with sight loss is set to increase significantly. It is predicted that by 2050 the number of people with sight loss in the UK will double to over four million [1, 2].

This is based on the assumption that the underlying risk factors associated with sight loss do not change and that broad demographic changes, such as aging population, will continue in coming decades [4].

Sight loss in numbers [1,2]

Age

- 1 per cent or 24,000 people aged 0-17
- 20 per cent or 410,000 people aged 18-64
- 20 per cent or 426,000 people aged 65-74
- 27 per cent or 569,000 people aged 75-84
- 32 per cent or 666,000 people aged 85+

Gender

- 61 per cent or 1,280,000 females
- 39 per cent or 820,000 males

Severity

- 64 per cent or 1,350,000 people with mild sight loss
- 22 per cent or 469,000 people with moderate sight loss
- 13 per cent or 277,000 people with severe sight loss

Causes

The main causes of sight loss among the more than two million people living with sight loss are:

- 23 per cent or 488,000 people with AMD
- 19 per cent or 394,000 people with cataract
- 5 per cent or 97,000 people with diabetic retinopathy
- 7 per cent or 151,000 people with glaucoma
- 39 per cent or 809,000 people with uncorrected refractive error
- 7 per cent or 155,000 people with other eye problems

1 in 5

people will live with sight loss in their lifetime



Certification and registration

A Certificate of Vision Impairment (CVI) certifies a person as either sight impaired (partially sighted) or severely sight impaired (blind). The CVI provides a formal referral route for someone with sight loss to social care services.

Each CVI form is completed by a consultant ophthalmologist in an eye clinic and a copy is sent to the person's local social services department. Upon receipt of the CVI, social services offer registration and other relevant advice and services [5].

24,000 CVIs

More than 24,000 people are given a Certificate of Vision Impairment each year in England and Wales [6].

340,000 people registered

Around 340,000 people are registered blind or partially sighted in the UK. Half of these people are registered blind, and half are registered partially sighted [7].

The leading causes of sight loss amongst registered blind and partially sighted people are [8]:

- Age-related macular degeneration – 48 per cent
- Glaucoma – 16 per cent
- Cataract – 12 per cent
- Retinitis Pigmentosa – 10 per cent
- Diabetic eye disease – 8 per cent

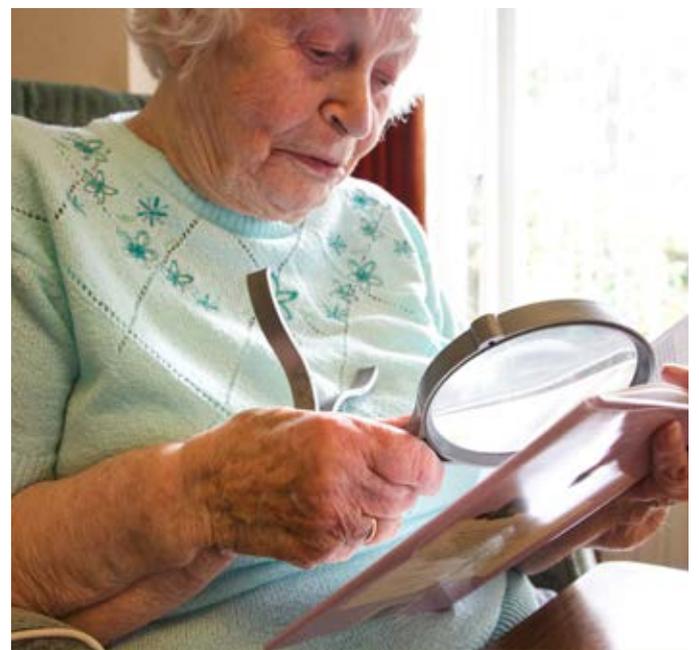
The number of people newly registered blind or partially sighted has decreased in recent years. In England, since 2003 we know that new registrations have decreased by 29 per cent [7,9].

But, it is important to remember that certification and registration only provide information about blind and partially sighted people who have been in some contact with health and social care services. They are a useful indication of the number of people affected by sight loss, but they do not provide the complete picture of how many people are affected by sight loss in the UK.

Around

340,000

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Impact of sight loss

While it is possible to talk about the circumstances of blind and partially sighted people as a whole, there are significant variations in people's experiences. Some factors are particularly influential:

- Adapting to sight loss – the extent to which an individual, with appropriate support at the right times, has adapted to sight loss.
- Demographics - such as age or whether or not someone has additional disabilities.
- Onset and severity of sight loss – when someone experienced sight loss and the extent of their sight loss.

This section highlights some overarching themes about the impact of sight loss based on a range of research.

Societal attitudes and inclusion

Public attitudes towards sight loss are rooted in stereotypes and a lack of knowledge about blindness and partial sight [10]. The majority of the UK general population agrees that blind and partially sighted people are not treated the same as everyone else [11].

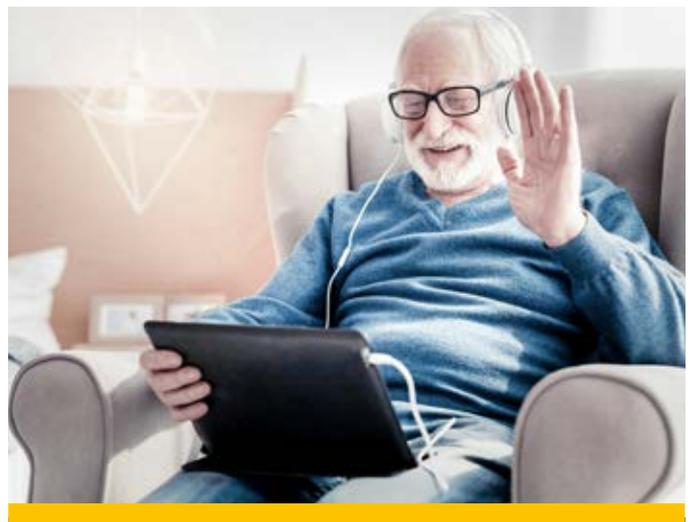
One of the main influences that drives greater feelings of positivity towards blind and partially sighted people is exposure. A greater familiarity results in more positive associations, a greater understanding as well as an increased sense of confidence in one's ability to provide appropriate support [10, 11].

“Changing people's attitudes of the possibilities of what blind people can

achieve. People still think we are totally incapable of everything and although help is invariably needed, there are often ways to work around obstacles if we were only included in decision making.” (RNIB research participant)

“People get blindness, and they get full sight, but they don't get how you walk around OK but can't see to recognize them, or might sometimes walk into something like a branch or even a car if it is the same colour as the road.” (RNIB research participant)

Despite legislation that aims to protect the rights of blind and partially sighted people, the accessibility of products, information and services is still not an area where people with sight loss have equality of experience. Whether this is being able to independently read instructions on grocery packaging [8], being able to enjoy favourite TV shows with audio description [12, 13] or getting information from health services in accessible formats [8], blind and partially sighted people experience a significant information and inclusion gap because of their vision impairment.



"If there was more things in shops to help people with sight loss to get round the store, maybe the writing on packaging could be better and directions in the store to be made bigger to help us get around easier." (RNIB research participant)

Transport systems, pavements and built environments are often not designed to be fully inclusive of people with a vision impairment. People with sight loss are unable to drive so, for journeys that cannot be made by walking, rely on public transport, taxis and lifts from friends or relatives. Navigating streets, public spaces and buildings can be a challenge for people with sight loss, particularly if the environment is unfamiliar, changeable or not designed in an accessible way [14, 15].

"If I ask a driver to tell me when the stop comes up some do and some don't which is why the automatic speech is useful. The trains don't have automatic speech in my area and sometimes the conductors have time to use the tannoy, but not always if they are busy. I understand but I still might miss my stop." (RNIB research participant)

"I could show you the bottom of my legs. I have a fair amount of bruising, cuts, and old scars from walking into advertising boards." (RNIB research participant)

Key stats

- 33 per cent of the UK population agree that people with a vision impairment are treated the same as everyone else [11].
- 54 per cent of the UK population disagree with the statement: "being blind or partially sighted makes getting a job impossible" [11].

- 60 per cent of the UK population think that there is a lot or a fair amount of discrimination against blind and partially sighted people [11].
- More than one-third of blind and partially sighted people say that they sometimes or frequently experience negative attitudes from the general public because of their sight loss. People of working age are more likely to say that they have been treated unfairly because of their sight loss [8].
- Four out of every 10 blind and partially sighted people were not able to make all the journeys that they want or need to make [8]
- Two-thirds of people of working age and one-third of people of pension age had collided with an obstacle on the pavement in the last three months [8].

55%

of blind and partially sighted people say their local roads are either not very safe or unsafe [4]



Lack of essential support and poor wellbeing

Being told you are losing your sight can be difficult to come to terms with, with common effects being depression and reduced wellbeing [8, 16, 17]. But many people do not receive essential support in relation to their sight loss [8, 17].

Having to re-learn how to do everyday things is the reality of losing your sight. This can include everything from re-learning how to make a cup of tea to moving safely around your local area. But provision of specialist rehabilitation services varies across the country, and most people do not receive practical support with mobility or practical tasks such as preparing food.

“It felt as though I’d be thrown on the scrap heap, that’s how it felt. In fact, I was very resentful of it ...I wanted to talk to somebody. I said, some therapy or something, I need to discuss it... there was nothing... that was the situation for quite some time.” (RNIB research participant)

“It got that bad I had to seek help ... they should have prompted me to get help quicker, took a long time. If seen more regularly at the beginning, it could have been avoided maybe.” (RNIB research participant)

Overall, feelings of wellbeing are lower among blind and partially sighted people compared to the UK average [8, 16, 18]. This includes feelings of unhappiness or depression, feelings of worthlessness and lack of confidence [8].

“I do feel lonely partly due to the pandemic and partly due to my sight loss. It is hard to separate what is really

the root cause of how I feel when they are so closely bound up together.” (RNIB research participant)

“I want to meet people with similar interests, I was hoping to start a group in the town as there is not much for visually impaired people... Isolation is my biggest issue I believe I can more or less deal with transport and shopping... I feel strangled.” (RNIB research participant)

Blind and partially sighted people can feel cut off from the people and things around them [8, 18]. This is compounded by inaccessible information, difficulty with everyday tasks such as shopping for groceries and problems navigating pavements or using public transport [8, 18].

“Without [the rehabilitation team] there would be no training, there would be no equipment for me to use. I’d be relying on people to do things for me, not doing it myself. I’d be relying on somebody to cook for me, not doing it myself”

(RNIB research participant)

“Many people and businesses do not seem to care that information in print and in visual format is useless to me. If more info were accessible I’d feel more included in society and able to be more independent.” (RNIB research participant)

Key stats

- Only 17 per cent of people experiencing sight loss are offered emotional support in relation to their deteriorating vision [8].
- More than four in 10 people attending low vision clinics are suffering from symptoms of clinical depression [17].
- People with sight loss were more than twice as likely to have experienced difficulties with unhappiness or depression than the UK average [16].
- More than 40 per cent of blind and partially sighted people feel moderately or completely cut off from the people and things around them [8].

Access to opportunities

The majority of visually impaired children are educated in inclusive (mainstream) education [19], but many children are being deprived of specialist support due to variation in service provision [19] and learning materials and exams are not consistently made available in alternative formats [20]. This results in lower educational attainment compared to children without a special educational need [21, 22].

“There are real challenges, no matter how much support you get... in my case anyway, I’m never going to get 100 per cent out of each and every class at university because they’re just

not designed for people who can’t see. That’s kind of the hard truth.” (RNIB research participant)

People with sight loss have a lower employment rate compared to the UK average [23]. The majority of blind and partially sighted say that they feel that their sight loss has stopped them reaching their full potential at work [23].

“Employers need to stop making assumptions based on what they think your ability to do something is based on your sight loss.... It affects your skills development and means you get passed over for promotions.” (RNIB research participant)

“I didn’t get the job because of the culture in the organisation and the [recruiting manager] couldn’t go and do the adaptations.” (RNIB research participant)

Many blind and partially sighted people have reduced opportunities to do the things they would like to take part in. This includes general leisure pursuits [8], and things like sports and fitness [8, 18, 24], civic and cultural engagement and access to volunteering opportunities [28].

“It takes a lot of confidence and energy to turn up at a class or training session and demand that you are allowed to join in and receive instruction that you can follow. I’ve had issues in the past with trainers not being especially welcoming.” (RNIB research participant)

We know that technology is a key enabler for people to feel more connected and more independent. But there is a significant generational divide in its use. Younger blind and partially sighted people much more likely to be using the

internet, a computer or a smartphone compared to older people [16, 18].

“I wish I could use a computer and pick up how to use it.” (RNIB research participant)

“Access to modern technology - I would use it if I could get out to get it. I have only an ancient mobile and a landline and no computer.” (RNIB research participant)

Key stats

- There are more than 26,000 visually impaired children in the UK, and around half of them have an additional special educational need or disability [25].
- Experiences of health, education and social care are often worse for children with vision impairment and additional disabilities compared to children with VI as their sole disability [27]
- Only one in four registered blind and partially sighted people of working age are in employment [23].
- The employment rate for blind and partially sighted people is the same as it was in 1991, and there has been no overall change in a generation [23].
- Half of blind and partially sighted people are always or frequently limited in the activities that they would like to take part in [8].
- 36% of blind and partially sighted people never use the internet or don't have access to it. This is significantly higher than the UK average of 10% [16].



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