# Voice of the Customer: Utilities and Technology

**(July – Sept 2021)**

Insights into the lives of blind and partially sighted people in the UK and the issues that matter most to them. This time on their experience of using technology and with managing utilities.

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## Introduction

As the UK’s leading sight loss charity, RNIB stands side by side with blind and partially sighted people through every challenge they face. To do this properly, in a constantly changing world, we need to keep listening to our customers to better understand their lives, needs and wishes.

Our ‘Voice of the customer’ is an ongoing programme which includes a regular survey of up to 400 people with sight loss, analysis of what people are talking about on our social media channels, and monthly focus groups which allow us to dive deeper into issues.

Insights and findings from these channels and initiatives are published in a series of quarterly reports to help us – and our partners – better understand the changing needs of blind and partially sighted people.

Not only will this help us respond to new challenges as they develop, we will use this knowledge to continue our mission to break down the barriers for people with sight loss and create a world where blind and partially sighted people participate equally.

## Key insights for this quarter – Unequal experience and low awareness of support for VI Utility customers, and tech as great equaliser

* **Many people with sight loss who are eligible to be on the Priority Services Register for utility companies, with all the benefits that it entails, are either unaware it exists or unsure if they are eligible. Most of those that are on it are not aware of the full range of support offered.**
* **Utilities customers with sight loss use the internet and email to access information and make contact with providers less than the general population. A significant portion experience accessibility issues with suppliers’ websites and close to half are not receiving information in their preferred format.**
* **Technology enables blind and partially sighted people to have access to information, connect with the outside world, and feel equal to their sighted peers, but the barriers of confidence, capability, and cost – amongst others – need to be tackled to unlock these benefits for more people.**

## Key topics

### Utilities

The central focus for our survey this quarter was to explore blind and partially sighted people’s experience with utilities companies.

All the statistics in this section, unless otherwise stated, are from the survey.

**Priority Services Register**

The Priority Services Register (PSR) is a free support service offered by utilities providers and network operators to help provide extra support to people in vulnerable situations. Of those we asked

**nearly half** (40%) are not on a PSR for either water or gas / electricity. When asked why they were not on any PSR **71% said they were unaware of the PSR**. Some were unsure whether they would meet the criteria to join the PSR.

**“I do not know what the requirements are/not sure if I qualify. Not an easy way to do this online and limited info on the process itself.”** [Survey respondent]

There are a number of support services those on the register can receive, including advance notice of disruption to water supply and priority support during an emergency. According to the Consumer Council for Water, **only 42% of customers are aware** of the additional support provided by a company’s priority services, despite the overall increase in customers signing up to the register [1]. Energy companies provide various financial support to customers, yet **73% of respondents said they were not aware** of any support schemes that could provide extra support to lower bills.

**The picture that emerges is that many people with sight loss who are eligible to be on the Priority Services Register, with all the benefits that it entails, are either unaware it exists or unsure if they are eligible. Most of those that are on it are not aware of the full range of support offered.**

**Accessing information and contacting providers**

For gas / electricity customers with sight loss:

* **Three quarters** of respondents said they had **never used** their provider’s website to access information.
* **1 in 5** have experienced some accessibility issues with suppliers’ websites.
* **Nearly three quarters** (73%)of respondents said it was very, or fairly **easy** to get in contact with their gas / electricity provider. **Around a quarter** (27%) said it was fairly, or very, **difficult**.
* People with sight loss are **half as likely** to use email (10% vs 22%) to contact their provider, compared to the general population [2].
* Around **1 in 5** (22%) ask a friend or relative to call on their behalf.
* **More than 2 in 5** are not receiving information in their preferred format.

We noticed similar patterns around internet usage, accessibility of websites, ease of contact, contact methods, and preferred formats for water suppliers too.

**Switching providers**

Whilst **half** of those we asked felt it was easy to switch providers, **nearly a third** (31%) felt it was not easy to switch. **Half** (49%) had switched providers and **half** (48%) had not. The most common reason for switching (64%) was due to lower costs or a better deal elsewhere.

### Technology

Technology remained a consistent theme across our social media forums, and was one of the topics we explored in greater depth in our focus groups this quarter. People consistently spoke of the ways in which technology enhances their world, increasing **accessibility**, **independence** and **inclusion**.

Whether it be for shopping, choosing from restaurant menus, using public transport and navigating, employment, accessing news or entertainment, technology enables blind and partially sighted people to have access to information, connect to the outside world, and feel equal to their sighted peers.

Focus group participants spoke about how technology is vital to be able to navigate independently and plan journeys. Apps such as Be My Eyes, Move It, GPS route finders, local taxi apps and Trainline were all mentioned, which allow people to plan routes, access timetables and inform transport staff of their disabilities and preferences.

**“…there’s nothing like the joy of doing something yourself.”** [Focus group participant]

Tech in transport infrastructure was also mentioned as hugely beneficial – such as audible buses and public announcements on trains – although facilitates can vary in quality and availability in different locations, with bigger cities often being better served.

Peer to peer support around use of tech is highly valued. Members of our Facebook groups are actively seeking responses and suggestions from those who use applications or tech in real life situations to gain a realistic insight into how it might work in their world.

**Skills and capability**

However, this quarter we also observed a push back against those who feel the technology they’re using is inaccessible, from those who feel it may actually be the lack of user skills, or the failure to update applications etc. that may be the problem or barrier. This points to the issue of **skills and capability**, which as noted in our recently published Sight Loss and Technology briefing [3], is one of the key barriers to digital and tech take up for people with sight loss. This issue also came out of our focus group discussions, where most participants felt they were unable to get the full use out of their tech due to lack of training and knowledge of what it can do. Related to this is the consideration of appropriate learning environments where people with sight loss can upskill their tech knowledge. Finding suitable, accessible, local training was said to be difficult.

**“I would generally say that my knowledge of JAWS and Kurtzweil is very, very poor…I’ve tried to upgrade my skills, but I just get so bored, and I cannot relate to it…maybe I need a different learning environment.”** [Focus group participant]

Alongside capability, we know that confidence, cost, accessibility, safety concerns and awareness by mainstream providers are additional barriers to tech take up by people with sight loss [3], and all these issues were reaffirmed in our focus group discussions.

**Confidence**

Participants spoke about the factors that increased their confidence with tech as including personal **acceptance of sight loss**, being **self-taught**, having access to the right technology from a **young age**, and **familiarity**. Increased use of tech during the pandemic had also increased confidence.

**Cost**

Some spoke about how the cost of technology put them off, and whilst some participants felt that knowing more about existing grants and how to access them would be extremely helpful, others felt that the use of benefits would not be enough to pay for the technology they would like. Free apps such as Seeing AI were valued.

**Accessibility**

The varying software and systems on different devices make accessibility a complicated process for blind and partially sighted people to learn, especially with constant updates to software and keystrokes. Although it was agreed by all focus group participants that apps are helpful, it was felt that some apps needed more work to enhance the overall accessibility. The dictation element on some apps was also raised. Some said that the ability to recognise regional accents would improve accessibility.

**Safety concerns**

Some participants said that their understanding of how to keep safe online or how to install and update virus software was lacking.

**“[The] pressure is enough when you have sight loss without the added pressures from people like scammers etc.”** [Focus group participant]

**Awareness**

Many described experiences of help from technology support and product experts, and employers as lacking. Schemes such as Access to Work were difficult to understand and access by employers, and suppliers often lack knowledge of accessible products or features.

**“…I’ve engaged with eight providers in my area and none of them have even heard of JAWS or Kurzweil**.” [Focus group participant]

## Recommendations for the sector

* Work with utility companies and the regulators to raise awareness of and promote the benefits of the Priority Services Register amongst VI people.
* Promote the benefits of tech and digital skills to VI people. Provide tailored support to increase their capability and confidence, and increase awareness of available grants.
* Facilitate peer support especially in relation to the use of technology.
* Proactively influence manufacturers in the development of tech to increase accessibility of apps and produce guidance on how to use accessibility features.
* Raise awareness of accessible tech across employers and mainstream technology experts, and support local societies to provide help where appropriate.

## References

Most of the research in this report is drawn from our quarterly tracker survey from July-Sept 2021, focus groups with blind and partially sighted people carried out July-Sept 2021, and analysis of our social media during July-Sept 2021. Reports produced from these sources are unpublished but summarised here. Additional references as follows:

1. [Water for all: Water Affordability and Vulnerability Report 2019-20](https://www.ccwater.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Water-for-All-Water-Affordability-and-Vulnerability-Report-2019-20.pdf) (CCW, 2020)
2. General population figures from [Consumer Perceptions of the Energy Market Q2 2021](https://www.ofgem.gov.uk/publications/consumer-perceptions-energy-market-q2-2021) (Ofgem, 2021)
3. [Sight Loss and Technology briefing](https://www.rnib.org.uk/health-social-care-and-education-professionals/knowledge-and-research-hub/research-reports/technology-and-television-research/sight-loss-and) (RNIB, 2021)

## About RNIB’s research

RNIB is a leading source of information on sight loss and the issues affecting blind and partially sighted people. Our Research and Knowledge Hub contains key information and statistics about blind and partially sighted people including our Sight Loss Data Tool, which provides information about sight loss at a local level throughout the UK. You’ll also find research reports on a range of topics including employment, education, technology, accessibility and more. Visit our Knowledge and Research Hub at: **rnib.org.uk/research**