

RNIB

supporting blind and
partially sighted people

The retail experience

How to make shopping accessible
for blind and partially sighted people

RNIB Good practice and standards



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Foreword

Going shopping is an activity which most people take for granted, but for blind and partially sighted people it can create a range of challenges. Locating shop doorways, finding shop assistants to help and selecting and paying for goods can all pose significant difficulties.

Making shopping accessible and enjoyable for blind and partially sighted customers isn't difficult. It just requires retailers to consider accessibility issues in their planning and ask blind and partially sighted customers what works for them. RNIB can help support you by improving access to your environments and connect you to blind and partially sighted consumers.

RNIB has worked with other visual impairment organisations to produce this guide to support the retail industry. The guide sets out good practice in meeting the needs of blind and partially sighted customers throughout the shopping experience.

The guide will assist large multiples and department stores as well as small independent retailers. We hope that you will use the guide to improve the shopping experience for your existing and potential blind and partially sighted customers.



Fazilet Hadi
RNIB Group Director Inclusive Society

Who should read this guide

The guide will assist large multiples and department stores as well as small independent retailers. We want to support you to make the services you provide more accessible to blind and partially sighted people and help you think of ways to consult directly with your blind and partially sighted customers about their needs and how you can best meet them.

RNIB accessibility statement

RNIB believes that blind and partially sighted people should enjoy full access to the world around them. This includes being able to shop for goods and services in ways which meet their particular needs and makes shopping an enjoyable experience. We are committed to work with the retail industry to achieve these aims.

Equality Law

The Equality Act 2010 requires providers to make their goods and services accessible to disabled people. This can include altering a policy or practice, or changing the way a service is delivered so that disabled people can fully benefit. For detailed information on changes to previous legislation, please refer to the Government Equalities Office website www.equalities.gov.uk

The costly truth

Almost two million people in the UK are living with sight loss. Bottom line: how much of this substantial and lucrative market is your business missing out on?

Key barriers to accessibility

Based on findings from a survey of 150 blind and partially sighted people [1]:

- 79 per cent stated that if a shop is difficult to navigate, it would stop them shopping there again
- 96 per cent experienced difficulty reading signs
- 95 per cent experienced difficulty reading labels
- 73 per cent had to avoid obstacles in aisles
- 89 per cent felt their shopping experience would be improved if the shop assistant would just read out their bill.

[1] One hundred and fifty blind and partially sighted members tell us about their experience of shopping as part of a telephone survey for Go! Shop, RNIB 2009/10. Visit rnib.org.uk/goshop for more information.

The costly truth

Small improvements to your services will not only benefit your business but will have a positive impact on the shopping experience for blind and partially sighted people and create loyal customers.

To make your services accessible to blind and partially sighted people, this guide will help you to address the key barriers to shopping experienced by customers with sight loss.

What can customers with sight problems see?

Being blind does not always mean that a person is living in total darkness. Many blind people and the majority of partially sighted people can recognise a friend at arm's length.

Other people will be affected by eye conditions in different ways: some will have no central vision or no vision to the sides; others may see a patchwork of blank and defined areas, or else everything may be seen as a vague blur.

The pictures on this page will give you some idea of what people may see, but it should be remembered that people are affected by eye conditions in different ways. You should not assume that you know what people can see simply because you know what eye condition they have.

What can customers with sight problems see?

Glaucoma can result in tunnel vision, where all side vision is lost and only central vision remains.



Glaucoma

Diabetic retinopathy can cause blurred or patchy vision.



Diabetic retinopathy

Macular degeneration can lead to a loss of central vision whilst side vision remains.



Macular degeneration

How to improve the shopping experience of customers with sight loss

RNIB has researched the shopping journeys of many blind and partially sighted people from the time they contemplate going to the shops to paying for their goods. Implementing good practice standards at key barrier points in the shopping journey will transform the negative experiences of blind and partially sighted people into positive ones.

Getting to and arriving at the shops

“When there’s a person like me who is blind or other people as well who are partially sighted, a staff member should come up to them and say ‘Would you like to be helped?’, ‘Is there anything I can do?’, ‘Can I show you anything or can I point anything out to you?’ or ‘Would you mind being helped?’”



How to improve the shopping experience

Many blind and partially sighted shoppers experience difficulty locating and navigating escalators, stairs, steps, lifts and ramps.

Good practice

- Apply colour contrast (a combination of light and dark eg dark text on a light background) hazard strips to the edge of escalator steps, stairs and handrails.
- Provide accessible hand-held maps eg tactile, large print or “Map for All”.

If staff see someone with a sight problem who they think may need help, they should introduce themselves, make sure the person knows they are speaking to them, explain who they are, and ask if assistance is needed. Let them state what kind of help they may need.

Individual guiding needs will vary but following the guidelines set out in the back of this guide will equip your staff with practical advice and information to feel confident about guiding people with sight problems.

For information about tactile flooring and accessible maps refer to pages 31 and 32.

Customer care

A person who is blind has a high degree of vision loss. About 18 per cent of blind people are totally blind – most can distinguish between light and dark. People who are partially sighted have a less severe loss of vision. It is important for your staff to be aware that not all people with sight loss carry a white cane or use a guide dog, and not all deaf-blind people carry a white cane with red bands. Blind and partially sighted people do of course shop independently but others may need assistance.



Good practice

- Designate a clearly defined “customer service” area adjacent to the entrance that customers know is monitored and that they can wait there for assistance.
- When your staff see a customer in need of assistance, they should introduce themselves, explain who they are, and ask if assistance is needed.
- Offer assistance to shoppers by guiding and helping them throughout the shopping journey.

How to improve the shopping experience

For information about Visual awareness training and guiding courses, refer to page 31.

Navigating and locating

“My friend picks, I push the trolley. The main problem for me is the fact that sometimes the staff in the supermarket leave the pallets in the aisles, or there might be something left on the floor. These are the kinds of things I can’t see and will bang in to. Similarly, they might have a floor cleaner out – like a buffer – with a cable. You might be able to make out the machine because it’s quite big, but the cable can trip you up.”



Getting around and finding the right products can be difficult especially when goods are periodically rearranged.

Good practice

- Keep aisles as clutter free as possible with enough space for easy navigation including with a guide dog or sighted guide.
- If using floor signs, fit sensors and position where they do not block the aisles.

- **Make it easier for customers to find the Customer Services/ Information stand. We suggest that the stand should be sited close to the main entrance.**

For information about making buildings accessible (Buildings audit), refer to page 31.

Selecting clothing

“I got into the shop and all I could hear was a lot of indistinct noise. I thought I’d aim for the sides of the shop and made my way towards the sound of people talking.



I asked them where the jumpers were. I didn’t know if they were staff or customers. But one of them said, ‘Here are some jumpers’. I said that I was blind and that I couldn’t see and she took me to them – she didn’t ask whether I wanted to be guided, she kind of held my shoulder. I later found out the woman I had asked was a member of staff – although she never said so. I asked her to tell me what jumpers there were for sale. She said there were some grey, black and red jumpers. I said I’d like a grey jumper and she said there were

How to improve the shopping experience

normal or long styles. She didn't offer to describe the style or designs of the jumpers – like whether they were high or low neck, the texture or anything. All she said was 'there are long or normal styles'."

Some shoppers may need assistance with selecting fashion items. It is important to allocate suitable staff to ensure effective communication and a better understanding of your customers' needs.

Good practice

- **Offer a dedicated service to assist with the fashion needs of men and women including fitting, styling and colours.**
- **Provide a small selection of clothing for customers to choose from including different ages and gender.**

For information about producing accessible documents and making your website accessible (Access audits – websites), refer to page 31.

Selecting food products

“Another problem for me, shopping alone, is that I find it hard to read small details – so I'll miss out on being able to find the best bargains

and the promotions because I can't see them. For someone with sight they'll be able to make comparisons between products in the same range. That's harder for me. I tend to stick to what I know no matter what, which means people like me tend to have to pay more for our shopping."



Making sense of overhead signs, label, pricing and packaging information is a major obstacle to fully accessing the services you provide. Accessible information should be available in store on sale items, special offers, benefits available to shoppers with disabilities and your refund and returns policies. Accessibility also extends to your website so you should ensure such information is also available online and that your website is designed to be compatible with access technology supported software.

Good practice

- **Use large print text throughout the store but preferably not block capitals. The usual mixture of upper and lower case letters makes word recognition easier for people with impaired vision.**

How to improve the shopping experience

- All of your staff should know which products have braille labelling eg pharmaceuticals and bleaches.
- Introduce larger font sizes on packaging for important information such as expiry dates, cooking procedures etc.
- Lighting should be diffused or directed away from shoppers to avoid glare, which can be uncomfortable or painful. All circulation areas and displays should be well lit with no significant changes in light level.
- Introduce colour contrast packaging which helps consumers with a visual impairment that will also suit the needs of mainstream shoppers.
- Introduce large print labels on clothing detailing relevant information (eg size, washing instructions)
- Introduce audio labelling on all products. This would enable people with an audio labeller, such as the RNIB PenFriend, to identify the goods they have purchased when they get home.
- If your staff provides assisted shopping, ensure your customer is advised of all relevant information on the goods they require such as different brands, varieties, prices, special offers etc.

Paying for goods

“When I was at the check out, they gave me my change but in my opinion, it wasn’t given correctly to a person like me that’s blind. Say, for instance, I gave them £20. In turn they should have said, ‘Here’s a five pound note, a two pound coin, a one pound coin and a ten pence piece and put it properly in my hand and said ‘put it away safe before you leave the store’.”



Differing chip and pin machines with small screen displays and having to quickly identify coins, bank notes and credit cards can be stressful and leads to queue delays.

Good practice

- At point of sale, your sales staff should read out the final cost of the shopping bill, confirm the amount of money handed to them, and count out any change handed back to the customer placing the change and receipt in the customer’s hand.

Card and cash payments

“I usually pay by debit card. I’m happy enough dealing with cash, but I often use the cash-back service at the supermarket rather than making a separate trip to the cash point. The chip and pin machines are sometimes awkward because they don’t all use the same layout.”



Good practice

- Ensure that your staff can process customer payments using Chip and Signature cards, if required.
- Introduce large button chip and pin (PED) machines with a standardised number layout, with a raised button (or blister) on the number 5 to assist with identification.
- Assistance may be needed to place credit cards into (PED) machines and with locating the number 5 digit. Your staff should enquire if assistance is needed.
- Ensure that your (PED) machines do not incorporate additional or complex menu items and selections as part of the transaction.

- Your sales staff should be advised not to put crisp flat banknotes and springy receipts onto a customer's hand on top of coins. They very often fall off before the customer can close his/her hand on them.

For information about Product Design Consultancy, refer to page 31.

On departure

“I then had to make my way back to the exit of the store unassisted. Overall, I felt the experience of shopping there an unpleasant one. I felt uncomfortable and anxious. When I asked for assistance, [the response] it was only half hearted.”



It makes good business sense for your customers to leave your establishment having had a good shopping experience.

Good practice

- Staff should guide customers back to the shop entrance and enquire whether transport is required eg a taxi.

Become an outstanding retailer

RNIB is working with service providers to develop beacons of good practice, organisations that can serve as exemplars of top quality customer service for blind and partially sighted people.

Top ten tips to make shopping more accessible today for customers with sight loss

1. Take a walk around one of your stores – are the aisles clutter free?

A step further: Talk to RNIB about an expert guided walk, get a copy of BS8300 from BSI or talk to a qualified consultant about improving store design. Also talk to RNIB's wayfinding team to find out about new solutions and to link into our exciting pilots. Visit rnib.org.uk/retail

2. Ask your web experts if your website is easily accessible for someone using access technology.

A step further: Visit rnib.org.uk/wac to get lots of free information about web access design and other useful facts.

3. Check your packaging – does it have clear font size and layout?

A step further: Check your packaging against RNIB See it Right guidelines or ask our experts to review it for you. Ensure it has clear layout, good visual contrast and a clear font. Visit rnib.org.uk/seeitright

4. Try to pay with a chip and signature card.

A step further: Ensure your customer facing staff know what to do with chip and signature card payments and remind them about it through internal staff magazines.

5. Be “cash clever” – tell customers how much to pay, and how much change there is.

A step further: Ensure your customer-facing staff confirms the total amount payable and count out cash handed back to all customers including cash back amounts. People like to know which notes they are given.

6. Make friends with your local shoppers.

A step further: Find out about blind and partially sighted people local to your outlets and involve them in changes you make. Ask them about their experiences – can you make things better?

7. Encourage helpful staff – ensure sight loss is covered in training.

A step further: Staff are invaluable to customer perceptions of service in stores. Ensure your staff are confident and willing to help by building on their training with regular updates in staff magazines, volunteering and fundraising opportunities.

8. Identify the best products – find out which products are useful for people with sight loss.

A step further: Get a list of RNIB referenced products and build accessibility into your procurement process for new products. Ensure all your staff know about helpful products such as those with larger buttons or displays – and that they can confidently explain the benefits. Visit rnib.org.uk/productdesign

9. Work outside in – link into wayfinding and transport networks.

A step further: Have a phone line in your store for calling a taxi company who welcomes customers with a range of disabilities. Find out the nearest bus stops, and link in to local systems such as minibus services or RNIB React installations. Visit rnib.org.uk/react

10. Become an outstanding retailer.

A step further: Work with RNIB to profile your business, or a particular part of your business, to others within your sector. This can help you to attract positive PR, more customers and lead to customer retention too. Find out more by calling us on **01733 37 53 45** or emailing **busdev@rnib.org.uk**

Guiding basics for people with sight loss

If your offer of assistance is accepted, ask where the person wants to go and how they would like to be guided. Ask if they would like to take your arm and if there is room to walk side by side, stand next to them and let them take hold of your arm with their fingers in the crook of your elbow.

You can keep your arm pointing downwards or you can bend it, as long as you keep your upper arm straight. By walking hand to arm in this way the person you are guiding will be at least half a pace behind you, making it easier to tell when you are turning by the movement of your body.

Steps, stairs and slopes:

- When you approach steps or a slope, tell the person you are guiding whether the steps go up or down. Wherever possible, they should be on the side with the handrail. If you need to change sides, inform the customer of your intention then ask them to stand still and let go of your guiding arm to allow you to come alongside. Walk towards the handrail and show its position with your guiding arm.
- As you begin to go up steps, the person you are guiding will feel your arm move when you place your weight on the first step. This is their cue to start. As you climb the second step, they are on the first. Tell them when you have reached the last step, stop and allow them to find it with their foot. When they feel their arm resume its normal position they will know that you are both on the level again.
- Going downstairs is always more difficult so give the person you are guiding plenty of time to hold onto the handrail securely and gauge the edge of the first step. Otherwise the technique is the same for going upstairs. Walk one step ahead, stop at the bottom and tell them there are no more steps.

- If you're not as tall as the person you are guiding, arm movements are not so clearly felt, especially as they may have their hand on your shoulder. If you take your first step with the foot on the same side as your guiding arm, the movement is more obvious.
- If the person you are guiding has a guide dog, the dog may be a substitute for the handrail or they may prefer to use both handrail and dog, rejoining you at the bottom of the steps. Approach the person from the side opposite to the dog and do not take hold of the harness or lead, as the guide dog owner needs this to control the dog. Some people prefer to walk at your side without holding your arm. In some situations you can also walk in front and the dog will follow you.

Escalators, travelators and lifts:

- Many blind and partially sighted people prefer to avoid escalators so if you are approaching one, ask the person you are guiding if they are happy to use it or if they would prefer an alternative. When you are using an escalator, inform the customer when they are either approaching or on the stepping on/off threshold

Guiding basics for people with sight loss

plate, guide them to the moving handrail and say whether you are going up or down. It is sometimes best if the person you are guiding negotiates the first step by themselves, as escalators are often too narrow to take people side by side. If possible, move ahead on the escalator once you have checked the person you are guiding is safely on it, so that you can help them off. If there is no alternative to using an escalator, you can ask that the escalator is turned off.

- Travelators should be used in the same way and you will need to say when you are reaching the end.
- It is not safe to take a dog on a moving escalator or travelator so you may need to find an alternative. The dog might need to be carried if there is no alternative. Discuss how you will do this or indeed if it is practical.
- Lifts are straightforward. Walk in side by side, if possible, and say whether you are moving up or down. Some people may prefer to be next to the lift wall so that they can steady themselves.

Go! Shop

Go! Shop is an RNIB project bringing blind and partially sighted people together with retail and transport companies to improve the shopping experience, from getting to the shops to paying for their goods. The following individuals from the retail industry were presented with RNIB's "Go! Shop" awards for demonstrating outstanding levels of customer service:

Helen Vint, Boots

During research, Helen demonstrated a natural, intuitive focus on the customer and immediately offered her assistance to Liz, who has no sight, when she entered the store. Helen provided a full description of the product Liz wished to purchase and guided her through the special offers available.

Michelle Moncaster, Co-op, Trelawney Crescent

Michelle has assisted Liz with her shopping for some time and it has now developed into a partnership of trust. Michelle directs Liz to the special offers, alerts her to the sell by dates, pushes the trolley and helps her pack her bags so that Liz knows where everything is when she unpacks.

Ian Puxty, Beacon Footwear, Lincoln

A father and son establishment, Beacon Footwear has demonstrated an innovative solution to meet the needs of Valerie, who is partially sighted. Ian Puxty delivered a large quantity of footwear for Valerie to choose from in the comfort of her own home.

Lauren Partington from the Card Shop

Lauren instinctively took a great deal of trouble to help a blind and partially sighted person by explaining the size of the cards, what they looked like, and what the occasion was for each card. This simple and intuitively helpful human interaction was vital in making the shopping experience less of an ordeal and avoiding potential social faux pas!

Marie Higgins, Tesco, Bagley

A personal shopper relationship has built up over some time so its now a real partnership. Maria Higgins directs Marie, who is blind, to the special offers, alerts her to the sell-by dates, pushes the trolley and helps her pack her bags, so that Marie knows what is where when she unpacks.

Visit rnib.org.uk/goshop for more information.

Support from RNIB: working towards an accessible future

Accessible documents

RNIB can help make all of your documents accessible for your customers. We can convert your information into braille, large print, e-text or audio as specified by your customer and either deliver through your store or directly to your customer. This service regularly handles information ranging from in-store leaflets and flyers through to more complicated documents such as magazines and even corporate information for your shareholders. Using our secure services, we can also provide confidential information on your behalf such as invoices, statements or loyalty card communications.

For more information on accessible documents, please call **01733 37 53 70** or email **businesslink@rnib.org.uk**

Consultancy services

Our Consultancy services can help support you by improving access to your environments and services. Services available to you include:

Support from RNIB

- **Visual and disability awareness training courses that aim to give your customer-facing staff more confidence in reaching customers with disabilities. These courses can be modified to meet your specific need and are well suited to cascading skills through training your trainers.**
- **Website audit and certification to ensure that your online presence is accessible. We also offer a range of training courses aimed at website owners, website designers, content authors and marketing personnel.**
- **Design consultancy to ensure that your products and communications are accessible. We undertake ergonomic assessments of products and undertake user testing to ensure that your products are both accessible and easy to use, awarding our coveted RNIB Reference benchmark to the best products. We can also advise on your print and graphic design, helping your designers find a balance between creativity and accessibility.**
- **Access audits of existing buildings and design appraisals of both new buildings and redevelopments. We will assess all of the features of your property and recommend practical solutions to overcome any potential issues.**

- We can also help you to provide the information that empowers blind and partially sighted people to be more independent in your store. This includes our RNIB “Map for All”, which is a bespoke static map that enables blind and partially sighted people to comprehend the layout of your store.

For more information on any of our Consultancy services, please call **01733 37 53 70** or email **businesslink@rnib.org.uk**

Opening the blind and partially sighted market to you

As a respected retailer, you will be proud that your offer is accessible to all and want blind and partially sighted customers to enjoy your services. At RNIB, we publish a variety of media channels that you may wish to consider in your marketing communications plan to target your offer at this audience. This includes Insight radio, RNIB’s own radio station with an audience of 85,000 listeners each week and Vision magazine, our membership magazine with a bi-monthly readership of 14,000.

Support from RNIB

For more information on promoting your services, please call 020 7391 3297 or email businesslink@rnib.org.uk

Making your services accessible to blind and partially sighted shoppers will help you gain and retain loyal customers.

RNIB can support you to implement reasonable adjustments and by working together with its partners, good practice standards will be achieved.

Acknowledgements and contacts

Acknowledgements

This publication was developed by RNIB in partnership with key organisations which provide services and support to people with sight loss. We would like to thank the following people and organisations for their insight during the production of this guide:

- Niamh Connolly and members of National Council for the Blind of Ireland (NCBI)
- Laura Matthews and members of Action on Hearing Loss (formerly RNID)
- Douglas Gilroy and members of the National Federation of the Blind of the United Kingdom
- Anthony Slater and customers of the Thomas Pocklington Trust.

Contacts

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supporting blind and
partially sighted people

The Royal National Institute of Blind People (RNIB) is the UK's leading charity offering information, support and advice to almost two million people with sight loss and to people who work within the sight loss community.

Our Innovation and Development teams work in partnership with industry to develop accessible technologies and services across a range of sectors. Our focuses include shopping, finance and payment systems, travel, mobile devices and emerging technologies.

Our Commercial Services develop and deliver practical, efficient and effective solutions for organisations that are facing accessibility challenges.

The Evidence and Service Impact team develops and disseminates good practice standards by working directly with blind and partially sighted people, service providers and regulators to research issues and improve the impact of services for customers.

National Council for the Blind of Ireland (NCBI)



Telephone: +353 1 830 7033

Email: info@ncbi.ie

Website: www.ncbi.ie

NCBI is a not-for-profit charitable organisation, who provides support and services nationwide to people experiencing sight loss as well as a range of services to voluntary, public and private organisations to help them make their services accessible to people.

Action on Hearing Loss (formerly RNID)



Telephone: 020 7296 8000

Email: informationline@rnid.org.uk

Website: www.rnid.org.uk

Action on Hearing Loss is the largest charity in the UK tackling hearing loss, offering a range of services for people who are deaf or hard of hearing and providing information and support on all aspects of deafness, hearing loss and tinnitus.

Thomas Pocklington Trust



Telephone: 020 8995 0880

Email: info@pocklington-trust.org.uk

Website: www.pocklington-trust.org.uk

Thomas Pocklington Trust is a leading provider of housing, care and support services for people with sight loss in the UK. They provide sheltered, supported and independent housing; residential and respite care; day and resource centres, and volunteer-based community support services. Each year they also fund a programme of social and public health research and development projects.

National Federation of the Blind of the United Kingdom (NFBUK)



Telephone: 01924 291313

Email: nfbuk@nfbuk.org

Website: www.nfbuk.org

NFBUK is an independent, non-political, self help campaigning pressure group and registered charity. Through representation and campaigning, the Federation strives to improve all aspects and quality of daily life for blind, partially sighted and deaf-blind people, and those whose sight impairment is part of multi-disability, in the UK.

RNIB believes that blind and partially sighted people should enjoy full access to the world around them. This includes being able to shop for goods and services in ways which meet their particular needs and makes shopping an enjoyable experience. We are committed to work with the retail industry to achieve these aims.

This guide will support you to make the services you provide more accessible to blind and partially sighted people. And of course, you should always consult directly with your blind and partially sighted customers about their needs and how you can best meet them.

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