# How the lockdown is affecting blind and partially sighted people

May 2020

**About Sight Loss in the UK**

* Every day 250 people start to lose their sight
* At least half of all sight loss is avoidable
* More than two million people have sight loss
* 350,000 people are registered blind or partially sighted

## Summary

New research from RNIB shows how social distancing is near-impossible for many blind and partially sighted people, while inaccessible signage and fears about how the public will react to them are causing additional stress and worry:

* 66% of blind and partially sighted respondents feel less independent now compared to before lockdown.
* 80% of all respondents reported that the way they shop for their essential shopping has changed since lockdown, with half as many blind and partially sighted people visiting stores independently.
* 74% of respondents were either very or quite concerned about getting access to food while 21% of people reported that they had had to ration food.
* A quarter (26%) of respondents said that they had struggled to get written information in a format that they could read and 17% said that they had struggled to access online information.

We are calling on the Government to:

* Issue guidance to service providers, businesses and employers to explain how to make social distancing measures accessible;
* Communicate to the public why people with hidden disabilities such as sight loss find it more difficult to social distance, and reduce the stigma on people unable to do so;
* Create tailored guidance for blind and partially sighted people on social distancing, including clear rules around guiding;
* Ensure all updates about coronavirus are easily available in formats blind and partially sighted people can read, and apps and testing are accessible.

## Access to services, businesses and workplaces

Lockdown has affected everyone’s access to services, but the nature of social distancing rules means they have disproportionally affected blind and partially sighted people as the social infrastructure and norms many rely on - such as access to supermarket online delivery slots - have been lost or eroded.

Access to groceries was an immediate problem highlighted by our helpline with RNIB’s services receiving an average of over 100 calls a day on this issue. Where new Perspex screens, one-way layouts, new signage or markings were introduced on the floor in supermarkets to enforce social distancing, these were largely inaccessible for blind and partially sighted people and introduced additional hazards while also creating social pressure for people to stick to rules that aren’t accessible for them. 74% of respondents were either very or quite concerned about getting access to food while 21% of people reported that they had had to ration food.

At the beginning I did go to the shops as I normally would the staff were very panicked … and didn’t know what to do I felt embarrassed … this has made me really worried about this I’m going to manage once lockdown is lifted

As lockdown eases, and more businesses begin to open up, we anticipate this problem is only going to increase as blind and partially sighted people find the services they are used to accessing have changed. RNIB has been contacting and sharing best practice directly with supermarkets and we have managed to persuade some chains to make some changes in-store. However this has been a long and labour-intensive process, and we are still receiving enquiries from people struggling to access the food they need.

It is very hard to know how to keep 2 metres away from people when you can't judge distance… I can't see the markings on the floor, so have been shouted at… I ended up in tears. It's not my fault that I can't see the floor markings.

Blind persons not being able to social distance is a severe issue affecting nearly all aspects of daily living as you are not able to even access a bus because you do not know which seats has been taped off

To avoid repeating the experience with supermarkets, the Government should issue guidance to services, businesses and transport providers about how to ensure changes they make to enforce social distancing are accessible to blind and partially sighted people. This could include tips on how to share information in accessible formats, for example, and how to share new information verbally as well as in signage or leaflets. How public transport operators provide assistance – usually done through close-contact guiding - will also need to be considered. RNIB would be happy to contribute to the creation of this guidance and these provisions are likely to be considered reasonable adjustments under the Equality Act.

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## Public perceptions

The population is concerned about the risk of contracting coronavirus, and the rules about how to social distance have been helpful in reducing the virus’s spread. However, these rules are inherently visual and have been incredibly challenging, if not impossible to follow for many for blind and partially sighted people. Many people with sight loss are unable to keep two metres away from other people and guide dogs are not trained this way. Blind and partially sighted people who haven’t been able to keep their distance have reported being confronted by passers-by, or being so nervous about breaking the rules that they have lost confidence and are concerned about leaving the house.

People don't understand what a white cane is for which makes you a target for comments like, "2 metres, give me some room"!

I am very concerned about social distancing when we do return to going out again. Visually Impaired people like myself who were independent before will be more disabled after this pandemic.

I feel I mustn’t go out because I can’t social distance on the street due to my blindness.

However, some blind and partially sighted people have reported positive experiences with neighbours and friends being willing to help them out.

Neighbours have been extremely helpful in telling me when they had [supermarket] delivery slots and allowing me to use them.

Is it important that public awareness of the challenges of social distancing is increased, to make this experience more widespread.

**The Government should communicate to the public why people with hidden disabilities such as sight loss find it more difficult to social distance, and reduce the stigma on people unable to do so.**

## Effects on independence and mental wellbeing

Two-thirds (66%) of blind and partially sighted respondents feel less independent now compared to before lockdown. Many people depend on a guide to get out and about but one in four (25%) blind and partially sighted people told us they don’t have someone in the same household as them who can guide. The close contact required when guiding means many people have lost this way of leaving the house, leaving people feeling much less independent.

Because I live alone the isolation has been very difficult. I would usually go for walks with friends or family. However they are so fearful of being fined as they live outside of my household .... I felt like I had been making so much progress before lockdown and now it’s as though I have taken 10 steps backwards.

80% of all respondents reported that the way they shop for their essential shopping has changed since lockdown, with half as many blind and partially sighted people now going to shops alone. Pre-lockdown, 28% of respondents got their shopping by navigating around shops themselves, which has fallen to just 14%. Similarly, before the lockdown, less than a fifth (18%) of respondents relied on someone else to shop for them whereas now nearly half (49%) shop this way, a huge loss of independence.

As well as having an impact practically - on access to food, ability to exercise, or attend medical appointments – it is also impacting people psychologically:

I live alone and feel isolated and alone for the first time in my life. I am also very acutely aware of my sight impairment in ways I am not usually.

By not being connected to my groups, I’ve felt very lonely and isolated, vulnerable and depressed. On several occasions I just stayed in bed being apathetic. My motivation has gone.

Video calling zoom is a fab app but as soon as there is more than two people I can’t tell who is talking and believe it or not it makes me feel even more useless

Some respondents reported positive experiences, particularly where they are digitally enabled:

All the webinars and focus groups set up by organisations means I have been talking to more people than I normally would before lockdown

It would be helpful if blind and partially sighted people were able to “combine” households so that people are less isolated and those who go out with friends and family can do so again.

**Public Health England should create tailored guidance for blind and partially sighted people on social distancing. Clear rules on guiding would help people understand their options and reassure people that they are not breaking the rules.**

## Access to information

As the Government, health officials and businesses have been grappling with the spread of coronavirus, vital information about changes in advice or policy has had to be communicated to the public extremely quickly. However, it seems this had led to such communications not going through the usual processes and accessibility checks. For example the letter sent at the end of March to those identified as ‘extremely vulnerable’ was not available in accessible formats. A quarter (26%) of respondents said that they had struggled to get written information in a format that they could read and 17% said that they had struggled to access online information.

I am a very independent person but feel disempowered by the lack of accessible information that has been sent out regarding covid 19. It feels like people with sight loss are being left out. I feel like we've been treated as if we don't exist. It's almost expected that everyone has access to the internet which not everyone does.

Despite our early highlighting of this issue as part of the #InfoForAll campaign, progress has been slow and inconsistent. We have found tens of examples of inaccessible social media communication about coronavirus from government bodies – such as images used to convey information without alt text, or videos without audio.

Alongside other charities, we have written to the Prime Minister asking for a senior national lead on accessibility to ensure that it is given the emphasis it needs. We are still awaiting a response. RNIB is also working with the Cabinet Office and the developers of the proposed NHS contact tracing app to ensure that it is accessible for blind and partially sighted people. We are collaborating with the team behind NHS coronavirus testing to ensure that staff at testing centres and mobile units are trained to work with blind and partially sighted people, and ensuring that alternative formats are available for instructions for the home testing kit.

**It is essential that all updates about coronavirus are easily available in formats blind and partially sighted people can read, and apps and testing are accessible.**

## About this research

This survey ran from Tuesday 28 April to Monday 11 May. There were 26 questions in total covering access to food, accessible information and social isolation. In total there were 471 responses. 313 respondents were from England, 15 from NI, 68 from Scotland and 74 from Wales. A variety of people responded covering different levels of sight impairment, different mobility aid users and a range of ages. 59% of respondents were severely sight impaired, 29% were sight impaired and 12% have a sight condition but are not registered. This means the sample is slightly skewed towards blind respondents who make up roughly half of the blind and partially sighted population.

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| About the RNIB The Royal National Institute of Blind People (RNIB) is one of the UK’s leading sight loss charities and the largest community of blind and partially sighted people. We provide a wealth of services including practical and emotional support through our RNIB Connect community and our Sight Loss Advice Service, guide business and public services on accessibility, campaign for change, and have a library of over 60,000 accessible reading materials, including daily newspapers.  Every day 250 people begin to lose their sight. We want society, communities and individuals to see differently about sight loss. In our 150th year RNIB renewed our focus on creating a world where there are no barriers to people with sight loss. |