# Inclusive Living Environments and Sight Loss Podcast: Transcript

I: Hello and welcome to this podcast where we will be talking about the environment and simple changes and hints that could be used to improve the space for a person with sight loss. My name’s Iain Kennedy from the Older People and Complex Needs team and I’m joined today by David Watkins who is RNIB’s Visibly Better Coordinator. David, can you tell us about your role and what you do?

D: As a Visibly Better coordinator I support organisations to improve their working practices and standards for people with sight loss. Things like communication, staff training and the biggest part of it is the build environment where we make environments a lot more accessible to everyone including those people living with sight loss.

I: And so when you’re talking about a built environment is that just a care home, what do you mean by an environment?

D: Well, I have worked with a lot of organisations, it includes hospitals, businesses and office, a general needs home like your standard three bedroomed detatched home, sheltered schemes and care homes. So basically in a nutshell built environment can be a place where we live, work and visit regularly.

I: So within environments what I’ve heard a lot in the past is lighting is very important and getting the best balance of lighting for different areas and different people. If someone was to say to you what is good lighting what would you say?

D: Lighting really where possible should be adaptable for the individual needs. Everyone has different requirements from lighting, but if it can be adaptable then it can suit a much broader range of people. So this can be dimmer switches or having wall lights as well as the ceiling lights, additional lamps and task lights for use in areas of detail work such as under the kitchen wall units or task lamps for reading or for whatever activity that person likes doing, but generally lighting should be evenly spread across rooms. A lot of lampshades these days for ceiling lamps can concentrate the lighting on the floor below, which then leaves the outer areas of the room darker. Lampshades that spread light across rooms are much better such as globe style shades and multidirectional light fittings. Important factor to remember is to have lampshades that completely cover the bulb; bare bulbs are really uncomfortable for people who suffer with glare issues. If someone is sight impaired then they can seek support from their local rehab officer for visual impairment on their individual lighting needs too.

I: People often talk about familiar environments and getting people as familiar with their environment as possible. I have heard that people will struggle or fall less in familiar environments. In your experience is this always the case?

D: The home is one of the most common places where people fall. Of course, there can be a range of reasons why people do fall, which includes the effects of medication or they feel giddy, have slippers that are not adequate enough for the wearer. However, if you do have sight loss you are much more likely to have a fall. If the areas in the home are difficult to understand such as knowing where the edge of the step is, locating the white handrails on the white bathroom tile, patterned kitchen worktops and carpets all make task work and moving all the more difficult when you do have sight loss. I remember speaking to a lady with macular degeneration in Bridgend and she didn’t know she had a white double socket, which was placed literally about two feet away above her pillow and the poor lady, what she had been doing is that when she finished reading, I think she was listening to talking books and some activities that you do just before you go to bed, go to sleep rather, that she would then - to get to turn the light out - she would walk to the doorway, turn the main switch light off. Then the room would be dark; then she would walk across a dark room back to her bed. So what she wanted was, she requested that the landlord could he put a double white socket near her bed. Well, when she asked that question I could see that there was a double white socket on a magnolia wall, which is not contrasted at all and the poor thing for the last 18 months had been walking in a dark room back to her bed. All we had to do was just paint a contrasting border around that white socket and she probably would have seen that from day one or very much soon after.

I: Okay. So you mentioned contrast there. What is contrast and how would you go about increasing it?

D: Colour tonal contrast is basically about making something a lot more clear to us, more noticeable and user friendly. It’s also easy and a cheap way of making everyday activity so much more accessible, for example, if you have a white handrail on a white wall that would be difficult for someone with sight loss to find, but if you contrast it by adding a darker tone colour to the wall or the handrail itself making it darker against a white wall it will be more easily noticeable from its surrounding surface. So you can apply this principle to fixtures and utensils all around the home, it’s just basically giving a tonal contrast from its adjacent surface or its surface from behind, just making that smaller item stand out a lot more easily.

I: Would the advice be the same for all setting or is it different advice for different settings particularly in communal areas, what would be your top tips for communal areas?

D: I think some of the things that can be done straight away are put in light cushions onto dark seats, which will make those items more noticeable. Light tablecloths can also be added to tables so their position in the room is more easily understood. Not having highly patterned floors and wallpaper is important. Aesthetics can still be maintained with plainer furnishings and importantly won’t disorientate people with different sight conditions. Finally, task lamps are important for varying times of year to help with tasks and activities. People tend to just cope or struggle without the extra light and this isn’t good for the eyes. Having a task lamp that focusses light on tasks really helps people to undertake their activities and are less of a chore.

I: So I've heard that entrance and exit areas within buildings are sometimes problematic for people, what are some simple principles to follow to make these areas more accessible for people with sight loss?

D: Right, okay, so to identify where the entrance firstly is, is important so locational clues are needed to support this. So locational clues could be a light on the front door, identifiable planting, other non-permanent fixtures placed nearby, but out of the main line of walk will help with locating the principle entrance. Opening mechanisms like locks and push pads need to be placed in an obvious position and again highlighted so it can be easily located. When through the door lighting needs to be sufficient and bright enough to help the eyes adapt quickly to the new light environment. Lighting colour tonal contrast and identifiable landmarks are key to understanding your way into and out of a building. So you can be creative with landmarks, which can stimulate a number of your senses that includes sight and smell.

I: So are there any additional points to consider for people with additional support needs or learning disabilities relating to the build environment?

D: No, essentially the approach that you would have generally would be exactly the same approach as it would be for people with learning disabilities, for colour contrasts, lighting and way finding.

I: Perfect, thank you. Are there any other resources available for people that would like to look a wee bit more in depth about the environmental changes or good practice for people?

D: Thomas Pocklington is another charity that provides support for people with sight loss and they have online publications on influencing design in your home. Also if you visit our Visibly Better webpage on the RNIB site you can download further publications on design for people with dementia and sight loss and learning disabilities and sight loss and the built environment.

I: Thanks David, and so in summary just to finish off, what would be your top three tips relating to sight loss and environment?

D: Whether it’s everyday tasks like cooking and using the bathroom or fixed fixtures around the home like sinks, doorways and handrails think about what simple tones and colours you can apply to make them more noticeable from their surroundings. Lighting has come on leaps and bounds in the last few years whether they’re wired or batteried and can be placed just about anywhere in the home. Lighting in wardrobes, cupboards, other worktops give people enhanced ease of use when carrying out tasks. Remember to ensure all lights around the home to be fully shielded from the naked eye. Finally, whether it’s your home or workplace environments they should be welcoming and you can add your own creativity in the choice of colours and tones that will not only take away from the monotone of having all white bathrooms and magnolia just about everywhere, but it would also help people with varying sight loss to be more confident in moving around and carrying out everyday tasks. There are thousands of colours to choose from, be as creative as you like.

I: That is great, David. Thanks so much for joining us.

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