# What we know about public attitudes and understanding

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**Introduction**

Blind and partially sighted people consistently tell us that public attitudes and understanding is a major barrier. Prevailing attitudes largely stem from low awareness and are based on assumptions in the absence of any meaningful contact with people who are blind, and a lack of representation in popular culture. Blindness is assumed to mean the total loss of vision, and there exists a great deal of fear and anxiety at the thought of becoming blind.

The public consider that blindness affects people’s ability to function well within physical environments, and across a wide range of social and professional roles. Authentic portrayals are rare. It is hard for people to imagine a blind person employed as anything other than a musician or politician, and these perceptions likely contribute to the low numbers of blind and partially sighted people in employment.

Through public awareness and behaviour change campaigns we want to build a new, positive, authentic narrative: to reduce the fear of blindness, increase empathy, and improve understanding of the spectrum of sight loss, which in turn will lead to blind and partially sighted people being better represented in all spheres of society.

**Summary**

* Blind and partially sighted people tell us public attitudes and understanding is one of their biggest challenges.
* The public have low awareness of the barriers that blind and partially sighted people face.
* Blindness is assumed to mean the total loss of vision. The public do not readily perceive that there are degrees of sight loss.
* Lack of familiarity is the principle driver of attitudes. Most people have no meaningful contact with blind or partially sighted people, and blindness is not well represented in popular culture.
* The public consider that blindness affects people’s ability to function well across a wide range of social roles and they find it extremely difficult to imagine that someone who is blind could be working.
* Interactions with the general public are by no means all negative, but negative experiences can have significant consequences on blind and partially sighted people’s confidence and wellbeing.
* On the whole people aren’t prejudiced towards blind and partially sighted people, but rather lack of contact means they have little knowledge or confidence around how they can help. Real life exposure is key, and encouragingly we are seeing a number of more positive portrayals in the media.
* Despite all of this, we are actually seeing signs that attitudes and perceptions among the public are worsening.
* Attitudes can change in light of greater knowledge, more positive experience and cultural narratives. Our #SeeThePerson campaign had a positive impact on those who saw it. However, we need to reach more people with sustained activity to make significant inroads into shaping public perceptions.

## What blind and partially sighted people tell us

**Blind and partially sighted people’s interactions with the public are mixed – with a range of positive and negative encounters across a variety of settings**

* Encouragingly, blind and partially sighted people are twice as likely to have had a positive experience than a negative one over the last three months (58 per cent reported experiencing positive attitudes or behaviour from staff or the public vs. 27 per cent who experienced negative attitudes or behaviour).
* However, when asked about which specific negative attitudes or behaviours they had experienced (implicitly over a longer timeframe) seven in 10 reported experiencing such attitudes. The most commonly reported were ‘Assumptions/judgements about my disability or what I can do’, ‘Rushing me or being impatient’, and ‘Forgetting, ignoring, or excluding me’.
* The most commonly reported impacts of negative attitudes and behaviours are reduced confidence, increased vulnerability and feeling disrespected.
* Negative behaviours are experienced across a range of environments including the workplace, retail, health, and education settings.

**Blind and partially sighted people’s perceptions of public attitudes to sight loss are also mixed**

* Nearly half of blind and partially sighted people feel that the general public does not understand what it means to be blind or partially sighted.
* Two in five blind and partially sighted people feel that the general public do not believe that blind or partially sighted people can contribute to society in the same way as sighted people.
* However, a similar proportion feel that the views held by the general public around sight loss are generally positive.
* These findings suggest that blind and partially sighted people do not believe the public are overtly prejudiced towards them but feel the public have little understanding of what it is like to live with sight loss and place significant limitations on what they believe blind and partially sighted people are capable of.

**Blind and partially sighted people feel that most of the public have good intentions, but that they often get it wrong due to lack of awareness and understanding**

* We know that lack of familiarity is the principle driver of attitudes. Most people have no meaningful contact with blind or partially sighted people, and blindness is not well represented in popular culture, therefore most people lack the knowledge and confidence to offer appropriate help.
* When we discussed this with focus groups, blind and partially sighted participants told us that some journeys on public transport can leave them feeling uncomfortable and awkward due to interruptions from well-intentioned members of the public. In can be difficult for some members of the public to recognise when someone does or does not require help.
* Participants told us that they are not afraid to have conversations with people and would rather people ask questions so they can educate the public and increase their understanding. However, it should be noted that this was a group willing to share their opinions about public attitudes with researchers.

**Blind and partially sighted people feel that real life exposure, positive media portrayals, as well as education and training could all help increase understanding**

* Focus group participants explained how personal exposure leads to greater understanding. However, sight loss is a relatively low-incidence disability, with around 85,000 people of working age registered blind or partially sighted, meaning opportunities to get to know a person with sight loss may not be that common. In addition, barriers prevent blind and partially sighted people participating in society (such as going to the gym), being ‘seen’ and therefore able to educate the public.
* Indirect exposure through celebrities, actors and public figures could bridge the gap for those who lack personal exposure. Participants called for greater and more accurate representation in the media, especially in ordinary situations and across different professions and in different environments.

**“You can look at representation that's happening…for example blind comedians on panel shows and challenging the norms and I think that's incredibly positive.”** Focus group participant

* Participants also spoke about the importance of education and training, starting at school and also encompassing public and private employers, especially those in public-facing roles.

**What the public think about sight loss and blind and partially sighted people**

**There is low awareness of sight loss amongst the public and business**

* The public have low awareness and understanding of sight loss.
* Blindness is assumed to mean the total loss of vision. The public do not readily perceive that there are degrees of sight loss, nor are they aware of the variety of conditions that can cause sight loss.
* There is a great deal of fear and anxiety at the thought of becoming blind. Four out of five people say that sight is the sense they fear losing the most.
* The public consider that blindness affects people’s ability to function well across a wide range of social roles and they find it extremely difficult to imagine that someone who is blind could be working.
* Lack of familiarity is the principle driver of attitudes. Most people have no meaningful contact with blind or partially sighted people, and blindness is not well represented in popular culture.
* However, attitudes can change in light of greater knowledge, more positive experience and cultural narratives.

**Perceived discrimination is reducing – but people have different interpretations of what constitutes discrimination**

* The public perceive discrimination towards blind and partially sighted people (and those with hearing loss) to be less than it is for other social groups. Two in five of the public believe there is ‘little or no’ discrimination towards blind and partially sighted people – an increase from one in three in 2020.
* This would be a positive development if discrimination was actually reducing. However, this finding could be attributed to the fact that the public lack awareness of the discrimination blind and partially sighted people can face. When presented with examples of discrimination which were more relevant to blind and partially sighted people (such as failure to provide accessible information) the public were less likely to perceive these as discriminatory than examples that were relevant to all groups.

**Public attitudes towards blind and partially sighted people are generally positive, but getting slowly worse**

* The public are more than twice as likely to have positive associations than negative associations towards blind and partially sighted people (65 per cent vs. 28 per cent).
* However, year-on-year (since 2020) we have observed a gradual overall decline in perceptions towards blind and partially sighted people. For example, the number of people who say they have avoided helping a blind or sighted person has increased, and the number of people who think blind or partially sighted people can lead as full a life as people who aren’t blind or partially sighted has declined. These trends are also apparent across other key metrics, including:

**Whether a blind or partially sighted person could do their job**

* Less than one in three people think a blind or partially sighted person could do their job (30 per cent, down from 32 per cent in 2021).

**People's perception of the social norm**

* The public are becoming less likely to agree that people treat blind and partially sighted people in the same way as anybody else (22 per cent agreed in 2022 vs. 30 per cent in 2021 and 35 per cent in 2020).

**Understanding of why some people may receive extra support**

* The public are becoming significantly less likely to understand why some blind and partially sighted people may receive extra support from the government (78 per cent understood why in 2022 vs. 84 per cent in 2021 and 86 per cent in 2020).

**Young adults, aged 16 to 24, are more likely to have negative interactions with blind and partially sighted people, despite greater exposure**

* 16- to 24-year-olds are significantly more likely to know or have interacted with someone who is blind or partially sighted in the past month than those over 35.
* We know that exposure can help build understanding and empathy, and in some ways the increased interactions this age group has with blind and partially sighted people appears to lead to more positive perceptions. For example, this age group are more likely to say they would offer assistance if they saw a blind or partially sighted person in the street, and they are more likely to think a person with sight loss could do their most recent job.
* However, despite greater familiarity within this age group:
* One in four admit they have avoided helping a blind or partially sighted person (vs. one in seven across all age groups).
* They are less likely to say they would treat a blind or partially sighted person in the same way they would treat anyone else.
* They are less likely to think blind and partially sighted people can do a range of activities such as use a mobile phone, enjoy a book or go to the gym.
* They are more likely to think that if a close friend or relative were to become blind or partially sighted it would affect their interaction with them.
* We need to better understand this anomaly that appears to exist in relation to young people, and consider what other factors that may be at play. We know, for example, that although this age group are more likely to know or interact with blind or partially sighted people, they report lower levels of confidence and higher feelings of nervousness around doing so.
* It is interesting to note that many young VI people are missing out on social engagement. At age 17 VI children (compared to non-disabled young people) are much more likely to never go to parties, and to say that other children pick on or bully them. The picture is complex and there may be other contributing factors, but it highlights how concerning the more negative attitudes among young adults is, and demonstrates the need for building empathy, knowledge, and confidence amongst this age group.

**Our #SeeThePerson campaign**

In October 2022 we ran a TV campaign to raise awareness of sight loss and some of the issues faced by blind and partially sighted people. We surveyed the public both before and after to gauge what impact the campaign had on shifting attitudes.

**The #SeeThePerson campaign worked well in changing perceptions towards sight loss for those who saw it. However, the limited reach (one in 10) was not enough to improve public attitudes overall**

* The campaign raised awareness of sight loss inequality – a quarter of those who recognised the campaign perceived that blind and partially sighted people face ‘a lot’ of discrimination (significantly more than non-recognisers and the highest rate since our tracking began in 2020).
* The campaign had a positive impact on the public thinking blind and partially sighted people can lead as full a life as people who are not blind or partially sighted – campaign recognisers were twice as likely to agree that blind and partially sighted people can lead a full life ‘all of the time’.
* The campaign worked well in raising the level of understanding of the lives of blind and partially sighted people – nearly half of campaign recognisers felt they had a good understanding about the lives of blind and partially sighted people (vs. 35 per cent of non-recognisers).
* The campaign worked really well in raising the level of understanding of the ability of blind and partially sighted people to do regular jobs – more than two in five campaign recognisers think a blind or partially sighted person could do their (most recent) job (vs. less than a third of non-recognisers).
* The campaign also cut through in terms of being willing to offer assistance and being confident in knowing how to provide assistance to those who are blind or partially sighted – campaign recognisers were significantly more likely to offer assistance (58 per cent vs. 49 per cent non-recognisers) and feel confident in providing assistance (54 per cent vs. 46 per cent non-recognisers).
* Campaign recognisers were more likely to know someone who is blind or partially sighted, so more work is required to better understand the impact of the campaign against this context.

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**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](http://www.rnib.org.uk/research)