# RNIB Voice of the Customer: Physical activity and Emerging from Lockdown

**(April – June 2021)**

Insights into the lives of blind and partially sighted people

in the UK and the issues that matter most to them.

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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 and understand their lives, needs and wishes better and better.

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 – lower physical activity levels and concerns around post-pandemic navigation

* **People with sight loss have lower physical activity levels and participate less in sport than the general public. Organisations that support VI people need to address the barriers of accessibility and awareness, cost, confidence and transportation.**
* **VI people have a range of concerns about emerging from lockdown – primarily around getting out and about. The sight loss sector and partners need to help increase confidence, promote available support, and raise awareness amongst the public and businesses.**

## Key topics

### Physical activity and sport

People with vision impairment have lower activity levels and participation less in sport compared to the general public.

* People with a vision impairment are **two times more likely to be considered inactive** compared to the whole population (53 per cent compared to 27 per cent) [1].

VI people are less likely to participate in physical activities compared to the UK average and other disabled people. Participation in the last 28 days was:

* 75 per cent for the whole population
* 61 per cent for all disabled people
* 52 per cent for people with a vision impairment [1].

**Young people**

Young people aged 16 to 34 years with a vision impairment have comparable activity levels to those without sight loss in the same age group, but the gap in activity widens significantly for people aged 35 to 54 years. This means we can be more confident that the gap in participation is related to vision loss rather than other factors such as the older age profile of people with sight loss.

**Desire to be more active Vs Impact of sight loss**

The vast majority (80%) of people with sight loss agree that it is important to them to do exercise regularly, but half of people with a VI feel having sight loss stops them from exercising as much as they want to [2].

* **Over half** of people with VI do not feel they have the opportunity to play sport.
* **A third of people** with vision impairment said there were sports or fitness activities that they would like to try but haven’t been able to [2].

**Barriers**

The four main barriers to accessing sport and physical activity are **accessibility and awareness, cost, having the confidence and transportation** [2].

* **A third** of people did not feel they had as much information as they would like about how sports like football, cricket or tennis can be made accessible for people with a vision impairment [2].

**Impact of Covid**

Blind and partially sighted people were more likely to have become inactive during the period of Covid lockdown, with many more people exercising at home [2].

* **Two in five people** said that lockdown had increased their desire to be more fit and active in the future [2].

### Emerging from lockdown

People with a vision impairment have a range of concerns about how things may change as restrictions are eased.

**“So much of my mental map has changed and been altered through the changes the restrictions have brought. Most organisations haven't thought about the impact upon VI people.”** [Survey respondent]

**Navigating and social distancing**

As restrictions ease, navigating is the number one key challenge and source of worry for people with sight loss. Concerns are heightened by changing layouts and busier crowd levels. Many have relied more on going out with family and friends to help navigate one-way systems, stuck to familiar shops and places, or used online shopping to avoid going into stores altogether. People also spoke about the increased presence of bikes on pavements and the risk this posed to disabled pedestrians.

* **Half** of people with sight loss are concerned about navigating changes to layouts or other features on familiar routes, and **48 per cent** are concerned about risk of injury navigating new features such as outside seating areas.
* **Half** of people with sight loss feel less confident going into shops now compared to before the pandemic.
* **45 per cent** are concerned about social distancing [2].

**Confidence levels have dipped** and due to this, **people feel more conscious about asking for help** than they did before the pandemic. In addition, people report that masks impact on remaining sight levels, especially when wearing glasses.

**Public transport**

Public transport was reported to be busy, unreliable, and

infrequent. People were concerned about infection and fearful of journeys being terminated in unfamiliar surroundings. In addition, people spoke of staff not being able to provide guided assistance and travel operators forgetting what the various disability passes allowed.

* **Over half** of people with sights loss feel less confident using public transport now compared to before the pandemic [2].

**“I am resigned to having to move as I can’t live properly where I am. I am far more dependant than I would be in a big or better designed and equipped town / city. I feel vulnerable in a way I didn’t pre-Covid.”** [Survey respondent]

**Public attitudes**

* **A third** of people with sight loss are concerned about public attitudes or reactions to them as a person with a vision impairment. This concern is heightened for people of working age with **up to half** concerned about public reactions [2].

People also told us about members of the public not taking notice of lanyards or stickers conveying that they need help social distancing, and animosity they faced when removing masks to hear or see better.

**Returning to work / office spaces**

Some people with sight loss are concerned about changes to

office spaces, finding their desks, booking spaces, and getting to,

from and around the office. Lack of social interaction at work due to the pandemic has resulted in many now relying on family to get to and from work.

**Resilience and support**

As members of an individual’s support network returned to their own lives full time (returning to work, school, etc), the disconnect with support services provided by Local Authorities, charities, and private care providers not yet back up and running to full capacity caused multiple problems. As face-to-face groups slowly opened, fears of isolation were expressed due to the potential loss of digital connections forged during the pandemic, and the need to find alternatives for shopping, care, mobility, and supported care became evident for those reliant of their established networks.

**Positive aspects of the pandemic**

Despite the concerns summarised above there have been some changes since the pandemic that have supported people with vision impairment to live independently.

* **65 per cent** want **priority shopping** to remain.
* **53 per cent** want **remote or digital access** to events or groups to remain.
* **39 per cent** want **remote working or volunteering** to remain [2].

**“A lot of remote things have been ideal to VI [people] since lockdown.”** [Survey respondent]

## Recommendations for the sector

* Continue to lobby for inclusive/accessible design to be integral to all changes to the public realm.
* Encourage employers – especially in transport, retail and services – to refresh the knowledge and skills of customer-facing staff so they are better equipped to serve people with sight loss.
* Support blind and partially sighted people to rebuild their confidence and regain independence – especially with getting out and about.
* Promote available help and support for people with sight loss, especially for those in rural areas.

## References

1. Active Lives Survey 2019/20 (Sport England, 2021)
2. RNIB Voice of the Customer Tracker survey April – June 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**