

**R N I B**

See differently

# **RNIB's Voice of the customer report 1**

(January – March 2021)

**Insights into the lives of blind and partially sighted people  
in the UK and the issues that matter most to them**



# Contents

- 3 Introduction**
- 4 Three key insights for this quarter**
- 5 Key topics**
  - 5 Independence**
  - 5 Health**
  - 6 Technology and online information**
  - 7 Finance and benefits**
  - 8 Mobility**
  - 8 Voting**
  - 9 Wellbeing**
  - 11 Public perceptions**
- 12 About RNIB's research**
- 12 References**

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**“I’m so much more than my disability. I’m a disabled person with abilities, and I’m so much more than what people might immediately judge.”**

Focus group attendee

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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 response to the coronavirus pandemic shows exactly why. As soon as the UK went into its first national lockdown in 2020, getting access to food, medicines and other essentials were key concerns highlighted by callers to our Helpline – we developed a three pronged approach to help and worked with the Government - through DEFRA - supermarkets and a food wholesaler to make food priority slots and other support available to people who needed it, when they needed it most.

Against this background, RNIB has launched Voice of the customer – to

ensure we are constantly listening to our community in a variety of ways. This ongoing programme includes a regular survey of up to 400 people with sight loss, analysis of what our community is talking about on our social media channels, as well as monthly focus groups which RNIB runs to get more detail and context from people as we seek to understand all sides of particularly complex issues.

Insights and findings from these channels and initiatives will be 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.



## Three key insights for this quarter – the negative impact of lockdown, the persistence of cliché and the potential for technology to change lives

1. The winter lockdown has had a negative impact on the wellbeing and confidence of blind and partially sighted people. Many feel isolated, lonely and anxious about getting out and about. As restrictions are lifted they will need appropriate and sensitive support to reconnect with society.
2. There is much public goodwill toward blind and partially sighted people, but old and inaccurate clichés persist. There is an opportunity for RNIB and the sight loss sector to create new authentic portrayals to update society's perceptions about people with sight loss and show how they are living, and what they are capable of.
3. Technology continues to be recognised as a great enabler, but there can often be mental and emotional barriers for people who could benefit from it. Training and support needs to be sensitive to individual attitudes, and revisited at different stages in someone's sight loss journey.



## Key topics

### Independence

Blind and partially sighted people tell us that independence is about having control. Like everyone, they want to be able to access their own personal and financial information, be confident around technology and have access to information online.

"[Independence] is not about doing everything ourselves but it's being in control of things and knowing where you can get support if and when you need it." [Focus group attendee]

Our latest survey shows that the winter lockdown, unsurprisingly, had a big impact on the independence of blind and partially sighted people. Nearly a quarter (23 per cent) of our respondents said they rarely or never feel independent in their day to day life. People reported being unable to access the support and services they previously did – whether that was relatives coming round to help with daily tasks – to more professional arrangements like support workers or cleaners coming in. They were now acutely aware of how dependent they were on family members for daily activities such as banking and shopping.

### Health

The ability to access personal health information is a fundamental right. It is an essential part of maintaining independence, yet across our focus groups and on social media people report that they do not find healthcare apps, such as My GP, easy to access or use. Many people also said they could not receive information about coronavirus vaccines in their desired format.

People also said they felt anxious when going to a vaccine centre. There is uncertainty about whether blind and partially sighted people were included in the vulnerable category and could receive their vaccine earlier. Despite these anxieties, our survey indicates that, of those who had accessed the Vaccination Programme, almost all had a positive experience. Only eight per cent reported a poor experience.

With regard to testing, although the majority of people had a positive experience, almost one in five (23 per cent) had a poor experience that was not accessible to them.

We also continued to hear concerns over delays to eye care appointments caused by the lockdown, which risk impacting people's eye health.

## Technology and online information

Technology has the potential to be a great enabler and increase independence, and it is one of the most common topics RNIB receives enquiries on.

Focus group discussions indicate that, while learning how to use new technologies is recognised as key to achieving independence, further training and support is needed for some, especially as more and more services become digitised. Participants also talked about the difficulty in having to adapt to new kinds of accessible technology, at different stages of their sight loss journey.

Our latest survey highlights how the digital divide impacts blind and partially sighted people:

- Age is a very significant factor. People of working age, with sight loss, are much more likely to use the internet every day than people of retirement age or older.
- Around two thirds of people surveyed said they were excited about new technology and felt technology enabled them to live more independently. Yet over half also said that they tend to be late adopters of new technology.



**Nearly half (48 per cent) of people with a vision impairment use the internet on connected devices every day. This is lower than the 76 per cent cited as the national average [2].**

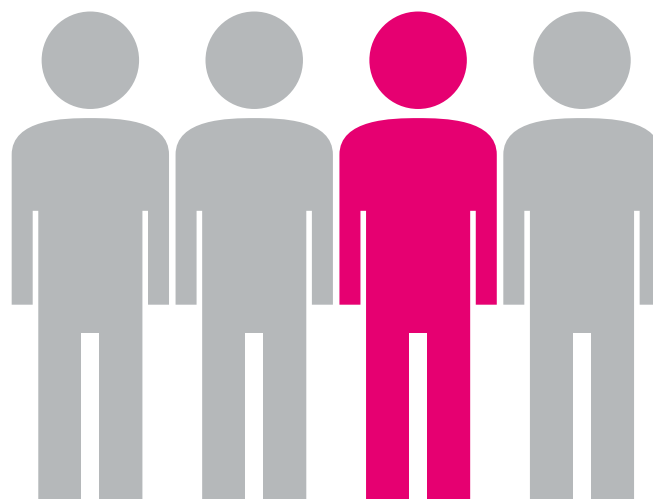
## Finance and benefits

Last quarter (October – December 2020) our survey found that three in four people feel they have been able to manage or access their finances in the way they want to. However, in this quarter, our focus group participants talked about a constant struggle to access their financial information independently, with some often relying on family members to help. Online banking and ATMs can be especially challenging.

Benefit entitlement and the application process was frequently discussed across our social media groups and it is one of the most common topics we receive enquiries on. Having financial support such as benefits can help people feel like they are on a level playing field financially, due to increased travel costs and disability aid expenses.

However, some people report a feeling of guilt and talked about the negative public perception of benefit recipients as “scroungers”. Some focus group participants felt that more could be done by government to break the stigma around disability.

Other participants said that they wanted to achieve financial independence through employment rather than benefits but felt their opportunities were reduced, especially after disclosing their vision impairment. We know that only one in four registered blind or partially sighted people of working age is in employment [1], so there are huge challenges in this area, not least around changing employer attitudes, of which more later.



**Did you know only **one** in **four** registered blind or partially sighted people of working age is in employment?**

## Mobility

One of the ways that the pandemic has reduced independence in blind and partially sighted people is in their ability to get out and about. They spoke about a loss of confidence in this area – with some not having been on a bus or train in the past year and now feared returning to work or university due to the impending commute. People also continue to experience difficulties following social distancing rules and would like to raise awareness of sighted guiding.

People with sight loss are seeking advice on buying and using a cane and where to get mobility training or refreshers when moving to a new area, but there is a lack of long cane training available.

“Probably losing confidence in my mobility when out and about. I feel out of practice and it worries me for when things are back to normal.”  
[Survey respondent when asked about biggest impact of lockdown]

## Voting

The right to vote independently, and in secret, is a cornerstone of our democracy. To inform our campaign to help make voting in the May elections safe and accessible for blind and partially sighted voters, we asked about it in our survey:

- People with a vision impairment are just as likely to vote as the general population.
- However, they were more likely to use a postal vote than the general population.



# VOTE

**Over half (57 per cent) of respondents require assistance to vote either in person or via post.**



## Wellbeing

Previous research indicates that people with a vision impairment are more likely to have lower wellbeing than the general population [1, 2].

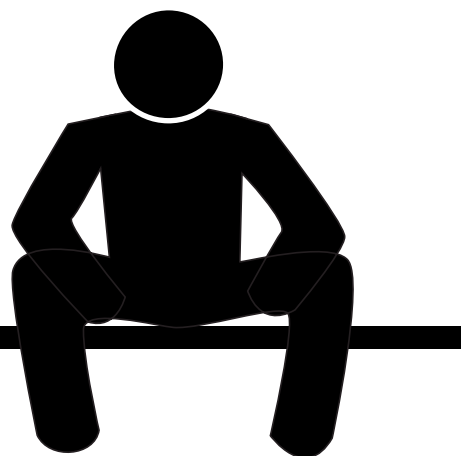
Findings from our survey indicate that while most people are always, often or sometimes optimistic about the future, a third of people with a vision impairment rarely or never feel this way.

Most notably, over a third (39 per cent) of people with a vision impairment rarely or never feel close to other people. This measure is substantially poorer than that found in our My Voice research where only 13 per cent of people rarely or never felt close to other people [1] and is almost certainly due to the coronavirus pandemic and limited social interaction.

## The impact of lockdown on wellbeing

The third lockdown had a larger impact on emotional wellbeing than previous lockdowns. We asked survey respondents what the one biggest impact on their life had been as a result of the winter lockdown restrictions. By far the most common response from almost half of participants was the loss of social contact. A lot of people talked about feeling isolated and lonely as a result of not being able to get out and about like they used to. Focus group participants also spoke about how the reduction in collaborative hobbies such as guided walking and running contributed to these feelings.

**39 per cent** of people with a vision impairment rarely or never feel close to other people. This has **increased by 26 per cent** since 2015.



### Coming to terms with sight loss

On our social media groups people were asking for advice on taking time off work to “come to terms” with their sight loss and sharing their anxieties and fears on being recently diagnosed and not knowing what to do next. We were able to explore this in our focus groups where participants said that learning to accept their vision impairment and asking for help when needed were crucial steps needed to adapt.

“It doesn’t make me any less of a person to ask for help, it makes me a stronger person.” [Focus group attendee]

Participants cited finding little things that make life easier and more enjoyable, and learning and adapting to new technology, as key. However, they also spoke of various mental and emotional challenges attached to getting used to a new way of doing things.

### Identity

Focus group discussions indicate that identity is influenced by multiple factors. One of these is whether or not someone has grown up with sight loss. Certain life events such as getting married, having children, or moving jobs, can also impact on the level that sight loss plays into identity.

Using a visual identifier such as a lanyard or guide dog was seen as a positive step forward and fed into feelings of acceptance and optimism for some.

The initial diagnosis pathway also plays a vital role in how people feel about their sight loss – having more initial support, receiving counselling, talking to others and having time to reflect on their journey were all mentioned.

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**“I’m still me, and I’m proud of the fact this has happened, and I am still living life.”** Focus group attendee

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## Public perceptions

In focus group discussions there were mixed feelings about societal attitudes towards sight loss but all participants agreed that there needs to be more awareness of what sight loss is like to remove the old clichés such as “You don’t look blind”. People also spoke about the public’s reaction to certain aids such as a cane, which in turn made users feel more vulnerable.

“I’m so much more than my disability. I’m a disabled person with abilities, and I’m so much more than what people might immediately judge.” [Focus group attendee]

Some participants felt that people tend to withdraw from those with disabilities and do not expect them to enjoy the same things as the rest of society. Participants agreed that it was important to show blind and partially sighted people doing normal things like cooking, as well as the extraordinary such as extreme sports in the media.

“I’m not saying that every single person with a disability will want to do these things, but it’s all about normalising disabilities and changing perceptions.” [Focus group attendee]

The kindness of the public was also acknowledged, and it was agreed that people usually do offer help when needed.

“Most people are nicer than we expect them to be.” [Focus group attendee]

The participants agreed that societal views are most likely down to a lack of awareness and understanding. However, the possibility that prejudice from employers might arise from a perception that they will need to pay more was also discussed, and in fact only 60 per cent of employers we polled said that they would be willing to make adaptations in order to employ a blind or partially sighted person [3].

It was felt that what is needed is a collaborative effort across society to educate others and raise awareness of sight loss.

## 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](https://rnib.org.uk/research)

### References

1. My Voice: The views and experiences of blind and partially sighted people in the UK, 2015, RNIB.
2. Understanding Society: comparing the circumstances of people with sight loss to the UK population, 2019, RNIB.
3. Employment for blind and partially sighted people in 2019, 2021, RNIB

# RNIB

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