



Quick wins... and missed opportunities

How local authorities can work with blind and partially sighted people to build a better future

Main report



supporting blind and partially sighted people



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We would also like to thank the local organisations supporting blind and partially sighted people who played an invaluable role in helping to organise and host focus groups for this research.

Together with local organisations, RNIB plays a leading role in the UK Vision Strategy which seeks a major transformation in the UK's eye health, eyecare and sight loss services. One of the main aims of the strategy is to improve the coordination and effectiveness of services and support for people with permanent sight loss. Another key aim is to improve the attitudes, awareness and actions of service providers, including local councils, so that people with sight loss can exercise independence, control and choice.

This report highlights the critical role that local councils and partners play in realising the aspirations of the UK Vision Strategy.

Foreword



Local authorities are taking on greater responsibilities; this is without doubt a good news story. A key example of this is the new role in one of the areas that matters most to the people we serve: health and wellbeing. These are clearly exciting times but senior leaders are operating in a challenging climate so our role at the Local Government Association is to help make sense of the many diverse challenges confronting authorities, for example by providing expert advice and leadership development. We also believe it is important to facilitate networking and other opportunities for lead members to share information on what works, what doesn't and what will genuinely make an impact during a period where council budgets are constantly under severe strain.

At the Local Government Association we welcome contributions from colleagues in other civil society and not-for-profit organisations working towards the same objectives. This is why I commend this joint report from the Office for Public Management (OPM) and the Royal National Institute of Blind People (RNIB).

The report is a valuable resource during a period of considerable change for local government. It sets out the many simple, practical and inexpensive things authorities can do to make a meaningful difference to the lives of disabled people. It is imperative we listen to and work in partnership with voluntary and community organisations that often know these communities best. As this report illustrates, local groups can deliver highly effective services and support, albeit on a shoestring. It is in all our interests to engage with these groups and enable them to carry on with the work they are doing.

We must also use tools like joint strategic needs assessments to strengthen our understanding of blind and partially sighted and other groups of disabled people's needs. The new health landscape presents us with an opportunity to join up services and remove obstacles to support. So we must seize this agenda for the benefit of people who live with a visual impairment. Anxiety about some of the changes afoot means councils must demonstrate we are on their side.

I particularly recommend you note the top three recommendations setting out the practical ways in which authorities can make a difference to blind and partially sighted people in their area.

**Councillor David Rogers OBE, Chairman, Local Government Association
Community Wellbeing Board**

Executive summary

Sight loss is a growing problem. Almost two million people in the UK have a sight problem which has a serious impact on their daily lives – approximately one in 30 people. It is predicted that by 2020 the number of people with sight loss will rise to over 2,250,000, and 28,000 people are registered blind or partially sighted each year (1).

Becoming blind or partially sighted is a life-changing experience – it is the sense that people fear losing the most (2). There are an estimated 25,000 blind and partially sighted children living in Britain but most people living with a visual impairment first lose their sight in working age or later life, the vast majority of whom will be unprepared for the future.

Living with little or no sight requires access to different types of information and support from a range of services such as social services, health and voluntary sector organisations. There is a core bedrock of services which people with sight loss need to be able to access in order to live independently. This includes accessible information, rehabilitation for people who lose their sight so they can gain the skills and confidence to carry out day-to-day tasks, and support with getting around.

As such, local authorities have the potential to transform the lives of blind and partially sighted people, even in the toughest times. And there's an added bonus - designing inclusive services for blind and partially sighted people means getting it right more widely for local residents. The decisions local authorities make are even more important in a climate of reduced support and investment from central government.

This report, based on a major programme of RNIB research carried out by the independent public interest company OPM, shows that:

- Blind and partially sighted people are a diverse group of people with different experiences and needs. They have just as much to give to a local area as active citizens, as they might legitimately expect to receive in terms of support.
- In many cases, apparently modest help – from councils and from local voluntary and community groups – is nevertheless absolutely crucial. Accessible information, the ability to enjoy leisure and social activities combine with key preventative and rehabilitative services to enable blind and partially sighted people to live independent, connected and purposeful lives.
- These things are not luxuries, and they usually don't cost much. Yet if withdrawn, the impact on blind and partially sighted people can be dramatic: tipping lives into a spiral ending in isolation, ill health and despondency. Sadly, there are plenty of cases of this happening already.

- Luckily, for every missed opportunity there's a quick win: an example of a local authority developing or supporting a practical, inexpensive innovation, often at the behest of or in partnership with blind and partially sighted people themselves.
- Looking to the future, the impetus for more councils to adopt more of these simple but deeply valuable solutions will only become stronger. All the evidence suggests that financial and other pressures have barely begun to bite. The time is now for local authorities to help build a better future for blind and partially sighted people.

Here's how local authorities can make the greatest difference...

Local authorities could find it helpful to consider the needs of blind and partially sighted people in a holistic way, examining how their services and policies affect or support these residents. The shift would be away from planning solely on an individual service level to planning that enables the whole population to achieve independence and inclusion. This could partly be achieved through a robust joint strategic needs assessment followed by a comprehensive joint health and wellbeing strategy. The UK Vision Strategy outcomes framework "Seeing it my way" can also assist local authorities with this task.

The three fundamental goals local authorities should work towards include:

1. Delivering a "bedrock" of preventative and rehabilitative services which combine to help people who lose their sight adjust to life with little or no sight. Without effective rehabilitation and skills training blind and partially sighted people cannot lead full or independent lives. To find out more about how **Plymouth City Council's** experience in this area read our full report.
2. Working in partnership with and involving blind and partially sighted people in the community; local organisations of blind and partially sighted people are a major asset to their communities so councils could view them as the "go-to people" to effectively reach people living with sight loss. To find out more about **South Tyneside Metropolitan Borough Council's** experience in this area read our full report.
3. Embedding accessibility in everything they do, beginning by setting a specific and measurable objective to systematically record blind and partially sighted residents' preferred reading formats so all council information can be delivered in the correct way. Councils can also mainstream accessibility by involving blind and partially sighted people in decision-making on changes to the built environment and local transport. To find out more about **Leicester City Council's** experience in this area read our full report.

Download the full report from rnib.org.uk/quickwins

The research – which included focus groups with a representative range of blind and partially sighted people, in-depth interviews, and case studies of best practice in three local areas – found that there were five main areas which were most important to blind and partially sighted people’s lives, and where local councils could make most difference.

1. Independence

Poor planning or ill-thought through decisions can have a major impact on blind and partially sighted people’s independence, forcing more reliance on friends, family or other sources of support like local community groups. In the worst cases, poor decisions leave people isolated and housebound. Nevertheless, some local authorities have developed innovative practice to support blind and partially sighted people to live independently which is making a real difference. Key messages around independence include:

- There is evidence of a move from specialist support for blind and partially sighted people to a more generic model of provision, in an attempt to cut costs.
- Rehabilitation – where people learn new skills to accommodate their sight loss and return to work – was crucial, and can make a major positive impact. These services too are under threat.
- The result of cuts to services in many areas has been that local voluntary and community groups have become even more vital than before. Many of the people we spoke to feared being tipped over from “just about managing” into “not coping” if support reduces any further.
- Not having the ability to travel easily, blind and partially sighted people find it much more difficult to work, study and keep connected. Concessionary travel is critical, but particularly vulnerable to budget cuts.
- Blind and partially sighted people told us that many of their local areas were cluttered places that for sighted people might not cause a problem but for them were very hazardous. In some cases this leads to blind and partially sighted people choosing not to go out because they are fearful of falling and hurting themselves.

Joan

Now in her 60s, Joan was registered blind in 2005 following years of deteriorating eyesight. She says: “Eventually they said there was nothing they could do and I needed to think about registering as blind... of course this gives you a little bit of a turn. The doctor recommended I see someone to help me cope, a local group for blind people... it was the best advice ever.”



2. Wellbeing

Blind and partially sighted people told us they wanted to feel part of their local communities, connected to the people and environment around them and able to pursue interests and activities that meant something to them. Key messages around wellbeing include:

- Feeling socially connected was important across all age groups but people of different ages relied on different ways to create these connections. Where people lacked opportunities for social interaction they felt isolated and mental health suffered.
- Working age and older blind and partially sighted people reported cuts to the funding of some support groups which had also impacted on the extent to which they could take part in community activities and feel connected. One group had their funding for transport cut, leaving them in the precarious and unsustainable position of being reliant on volunteers for this service.
- Despite the challenges, a number of areas are supporting opportunities for blind and partially sighted people to meet people, feel connected and be more socially included. These include buddy schemes for children, and befriending services funded by the local authority.
- Taking part in cultural, sporting or other leisure activities also provided the people we spoke to with opportunities for creating and sustaining social connections. However, a lack of accessible information about activities and the support available for blind and partially sighted people to participate was a big barrier to taking part.

Alex

Alex is 26 and registered blind. He enjoys an active social life. Alex wants local authorities to help blind and partially sighted people forge better connections amongst themselves: “Blind people haven’t really ‘come through’ in my area, which is something that I really wish to change. By ‘coming through’ I mean making decision makers aware of blind and partially sighted people... we want to be doing sports, socialising, being more engaged in society.”



3. Fulfilling potential

Our research confirms how much blind and partially sighted people want to fulfil their potential and make an active contribution to society. This is achieved through using their skills and experience in the workplace and acquiring new skills and knowledge through training and learning activities. Key messages around fulfilling potential include:

- Without the much needed support in mainstream education settings, parents and young blind and partially sighted people told us they would not be able to participate and succeed. The parents and young people we spoke to said that spending cuts had diminished the level of support in schools: staff had increased workloads and less time to help individual families.
- Parents reflected aspirations outlined in national policy changes to assessing and planning for pupils' special educational needs. Parents experienced the statementing process to secure additional support from the local authority as adversarial. This process was described as confusing and as a "fight", with local authorities starting off from a position of wanting to offer the bare minimum rather than jointly exploring what support was needed with families.
- Despite the benefits of employment and the fact that young and working age blind and partially sighted people want to work, employment opportunities and experiences were reported as very rare.
- Blind and partially sighted people talked about many barriers to getting and staying in employment, including access to appropriate support, workplace bullying and concerns about financial vulnerability.
- However, this research suggests that the biggest barrier to employment for blind and partially sighted people is the attitude of employers, who perceive additional unwanted hassle and cost.

Harriet

Harriet and her husband and two of their three children are visually impaired. Harriet's message to local politicians is: "Talk to visually impaired people directly if you want to know something. Go directly to the source, the children and mothers and people who know the difficulties. There are so many people who talk for us who haven't got a clue what life is like for us."



4. Keeping informed

Blind and partially sighted people told us they wanted to be informed citizens. They want to know about and contribute to the world around them. Research findings show that the Talking Newspaper services in particular helped blind and partially sighted people stay in touch with national and local news helping them to feel part of society. Key messages around accessible information include:

- Despite how important accessible information was felt to be, blind and partially sighted people often reported not being able to access information and that they found out about services by chance, through lucky encounters and sometimes after years of not knowing about a local service.
- Most research participants highlighted the “window of opportunity” that exists for information giving at the stage of being registered as blind or partially sighted. The research shows blind and partially sighted people want multiple opportunities to be informed about what is available to help them maintain their independence and make the most of their abilities.
- There was a large degree of reliance on third sector organisations for information about what support was available locally due to the paucity of accessible information from local statutory services.
- The research findings strongly suggest that blind and partially sighted people often experience blocks in information and communication between services. This results in either a vacuum of support or fragmented information about what support is available – often at the very time when it is needed the most.

John

John is in his 80s and is registered blind. He has macular degeneration. John speaks highly of the support he receives from his local council: “If I ever need anything, any time at all, I phone up the sensory team and they will sort it out. I have never had a problem [with them].”



5. Treated equally

Where blind and partially sighted people are treated equally and with respect, they feel valued and included in their communities and free to reach their potential. However, this research highlights many examples of discrimination, with blind and partially sighted people suffering abuse or not having their needs taken into account.

Key messages around equal treatment include:

- Being treated without dignity or respect was a commonly reported occurrence when the people we spoke to were out and about – for example when trying to catch a bus or getting a health check-up.
- The most common area for discrimination was in the workplace. Many blind and partially sighted people taking part in this research had been victims of bullying. Many of the people we spoke to had enjoyed opportunities as volunteers, but found these roles rarely led to paid employment.
- A strong message from the research was that staff working in public services often lack awareness of what being blind or partially sighted means for individuals. This means that without any intentional harm or malice, decisions can get made which have a negative impact on blind and partially sighted people.

Anne

Anne has been blind since birth. Now in her 40s she is finding it difficult to get work, despite being highly qualified. She says: “People fear blindness...they think ‘if I couldn’t see I couldn’t do anything’ and they transfer that onto the blind person... I would like it if people in general talked to us more, tapped into our skills – it’s not just non-functioning eyes, there is a whole person behind there.”



Radical steps

This important national research shows how much local authorities can make a valuable difference with apparently small but significant changes to local services and the local area itself. By ensuring that transport, information, the built environment and leisure activities are accessible to blind and partially sighted people, and that local voluntary organisations and key preventative and rehabilitative services are supported, councils can help to transform lives.

If these modest changes are not made, or if things like this are actually withdrawn, then the social and financial cost will be massive. Blind and partially sighted people will – in very many cases – no longer be able to cope, and the cost to local services for health, social care and other support will spiral. Examples of more substantial changes include:

- Achieving a better understanding of need and impact – by systematically collecting, monitoring and analysing data about the needs of blind and partially sighted people in a local area, and evaluating the impact of support provided. This can be achieved through robust joint strategic needs assessments.
- Making a commitment to listening to and involving all residents – disabled people must be at the centre of decisions about services they use. Mainstream consultation should be tailored to be accessible to blind and partially sighted people, and every opportunity should be taken to involve blind and partially sighted people in commissioning and other strategic decision making processes.
- Consideration of the needs of blind and partially sighted people – or in fact any disabled people – should never be a “bolt on” or a tick box exercise. In order to have real influence, equality impact assessment processes should be integrated into mainstream decision making. Councils should consider having a high level strategic objective that directly benefits disabled people. This could be achieved by developing a specific and measurable equality objective.
- Councils should ensure that the lived experience of blind and partially sighted people directly informs specifications used in procurement and commissioning, and that they enter into a real dialogue and partnership with the specialist voluntary and community organisations that can help to deliver support that meets people’s needs.
- Given what a big impact staff and decision makers’ attitudes can have on the quality of service provided, councils should seriously consider awareness raising for councillors, senior officers, managers and frontline staff that allows them to experience the day-to-day reality of being blind or partially sighted.

There is clearly a need for councils to take these more radical steps to make the best possible use of ever dwindling resources and to avoid disabled people being hit hardest.

1 Introduction

Local authorities have the potential to transform the lives of blind and partially sighted people, even in the toughest times. This report, based on a major programme of RNIB research carried out by the independent public interest company OPM, shows that:

- Blind and partially sighted people are a diverse group of people with different experiences and needs. They have just as much to give to a local area as active citizens – as employees, volunteers and active contributors to local communities – as they might legitimately expect to receive in terms of support.
- In many cases, apparently modest help – from councils and from local voluntary and community groups – is nevertheless absolutely crucial. Accessible information, the ability to enjoy leisure and social activities combine with key preventative and rehabilitative services to enable blind and partially sighted people to live independent, connected and purposeful lives.
- These things are not luxuries, and they usually don't cost much. Yet if withdrawn, the impact on blind and partially sighted people can be dramatic: tipping lives into a spiral ending in isolation, ill health and despondency. Sadly there are plenty of cases of this happening already.
- Luckily, for every missed opportunity there's a quick win: an example of a local authority developing or supporting a practical, inexpensive innovation, often at the behest of or in partnership with blind and partially sighted people themselves. This report has many such examples.
- Looking to the future, the impetus for more councils to adopt more of these simple but deeply valuable solutions will only become stronger. All the evidence suggests that financial and other pressures have barely begun to bite. The time is now for local authorities to help build a better future for blind and partially sighted people.

The principal **intended audience** for this report includes elected members, directors, managers, commissioners, policy-makers and professionals in local authorities. Whilst the research focuses on experiences of blind and partially sighted people living in England only, we expect that many of the messages reported will be directly relevant to local councils in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland too. The focus is firmly practical, and whilst the research reveals many problems and barriers, there are many simple yet impactful innovations showcased too.

1.1 Setting the scene

Sight loss is a growing problem. It currently affects about two million people in the UK – approximately one in 30 people – and these figures are set to rise to over 2,250,000 people by 2020. There are around 360,000 people registered as blind or partially sighted in the UK.

In England alone, around 300,000 people are registered blind or partially sighted. Typically on becoming certified as blind or partially sighted the local authority's social care team will contact the individual to ask about support needs. Blind or partially sighted people are usually then able to access rehabilitation workers (now sometimes referred to as reablement), for support with a range of activities such as mobility training or daily living skills. However, ongoing social care support for blind and partially sighted people is scarce. Three-quarters of councils already restrict access to care and support to individuals whose needs are deemed to be "substantial" or "critical" (3). Many blind and partially sighted people are rationed out of care services because they are deemed as having "moderate" or "low" needs. This demonstrates the "low baseline" that exists in terms of social care provision for many people with sight loss. There are, of course, other ways that local councils provide support to their blind and partially sighted residents through supporting voluntary groups and cultural and leisure services but early rehabilitative support is critical.

1.2 Tipping points

The research highlights the perilous position many blind and partially sighted people face: being tipped over from "just about getting by" into "not coping" if future support is withdrawn.

In fact the research shows that very many blind and partially sighted people just about get by with very little formal help from local authority services – for example they usually do not meet minimum thresholds for social care support. It has been acknowledged that standard ways of assessing support needs such as Fair Access to Care Services (FACS) do not accurately assess the level of support needed for blind and partially sighted people. Mismatched assessment processes are also hampered by a lack of understanding by professionals and the public more generally about the seriousness of sight loss for people (4).

With this said, modest support – whether from local authorities, or community/voluntary groups which might receive council backing – can provide a crucial lifeline, helping blind and partially sighted people to live independent, healthy and purposeful lives. Things like provision of talking books, befriending services, a computer or swimming class or help to get back into work after sight loss – all these, whilst often small scale, are absolutely crucial.

On a similar note, blind and partially sighted people told us time and again that **how** councils and staff providing support and services act towards them had a massive bearing on their feelings of dignity and confidence.

Simple acts of sensitivity and kindness go a long way, just as a single instance of thoughtlessness – a bus driver racing off whilst a blind person is still finding her way to a seat, for example – can be crippling. And the first and most fundamental principle of any attempt at change must be to put disabled people in a position of influence, as co-producers of the final outcome.

1.3 Invest to save

Councils across the country are being forced to pare back services and support to the bare minimum, and ruthlessly scrutinise all services to ensure value for money. Perhaps the overriding message of this research and report is that councils must do everything they can to see the whole picture.

Rather than assuming that a particular service is niche or peripheral, it's vital for councils to consider the full impact of removing or downgrading it, both now and in the more medium term, in terms of social impact and impact on the bottom line: as a relatively small cost saving leads to significant expense later in terms of support to a disabled person who has become depressed, unwell or inactive as a result.

In achieving this, councils are not alone. We heard – in all the areas where we spoke to blind and partially sighted people – how vital and valued were local community and voluntary support groups. These groups provide advice, guidance, direct support around things like transport and retraining, accessible leisure and other activities, and, crucially, the chance to make and meet friends and share experiences. And in many cases all this is provided on a shoestring budget.

By acting as a crucial, low cost source of support for blind and partially sighted people, groups like this represent excellent value for money. Again: councils need to see the whole picture, rather than simply the opportunity to reduce a grant funding budget.

1.4 The time is now

All of the indicators and evidence suggest that however difficult budget cuts have been to date, the worst is probably yet to come. The next spending review will almost certainly bring little or no relief.

This means that in order to avoid a truly catastrophic impact on blind and partially sighted and other disabled people in the next few years, there is an urgent need for councils to act on two main levels.

First, it will be vital for local authorities to take some of the simple, inexpensive and practical steps outlined in the **practical ways to make an impact** summaries contained at the end of each chapter.

Second, in light of the scale and severity of the challenges facing public services, councils need to accelerate the consideration and implementation of more radical redesign options that fundamentally transform services. Some of these more strategic considerations are covered in the conclusion of this report, and range from different ways of pooling and deploying resources to taking a person-centred, flexible approach.

1.5 About this report and research

This report is based on research commissioned by RNIB in 2011 and conducted in the first half of 2012 by researchers from the independent public interest company OPM (see www.opm.co.uk).

The fieldwork included:

- focus groups with a representative cross section of blind and partially sighted people, which took place in nine locations across England,
- very in-depth ethnographic interviews to tell the story of a day in the life of five blind and partially sighted people, and
- three participative case studies focusing on the perspectives and input of a wide range of people working for and with three local authorities.

The focus of the case studies was to showcase specific examples of good practice in meeting the needs of blind and partially sighted people.

Councils whose officers and members gave generously of their time to participate in this research were chosen as a result of the specific project, services or innovations that we showcase in this report. Even within a single authority standards may vary widely, so it's important to bear in mind that the inclusion in this report should not be taken as RNIB commendation of the council as a whole.

The report is structured around five chapters relating to the **main themes** emerging from the various strands of the research. These themes relate to the things that the blind and partially sighted people we spoke to said were **most important** to their day-to-day lives: the things which, if in place, made life easy and enjoyable, but if missing could make life almost unbearable. Each chapter highlights aspirations, barriers, and good practice.

Introduction

The chapters are:

1. Independence – covering support for independent living, transport and the built environment.
2. Wellbeing – including coverage of social connectedness and accessible sport, leisure and cultural activities.
3. Fulfilling potential – focusing on blind and partially sighted people’s experiences of learning/education and employment.
4. Keeping informed – covering getting information and issues around information and support being joined up between agencies and services.
5. Treated equally – focusing on experiences of discrimination and awareness on the part of professionals and others.

A final chapter offers concluding thoughts, in particular drawing out the key strategic messages for local authorities arising from the research.

The in-depth interviews explored participants’ everyday lives, what helps them lead a fulfilling life and what restricts them, what changes they would like to see locally and their hopes for the future. The good practice case studies are designed to gather insights from local authorities where a person-centred approach is being taken and the findings are aimed to raise awareness and inspire other local authorities to promote good practice. This report draws on all these case studies’ experiences but to look at the evidence in greater depth please consult the separate “Case studies” document which is available from RNIB’s website at rnib.org.uk/quickwins and accompanies this report.



2 Independence

Blind and partially sighted people told us about how fiercely they prized their independence. As one blind woman put it: “independence is queen...the most important thing.” Most blind and partially sighted people **valued independence above everything else**. Independence meant being able to do things for yourself as much as possible. In practice this meant different things depending on people’s stage of life and personal priorities. Examples given included things like being able to get around, go shopping and get a job. Having an adequate income was also cited as an important factor in achieving independence.

A strong message from the research is that local authorities have a critical role in supporting blind and partially sighted people’s independence. Poor planning or ill-thought through decisions can have a major impact on blind and partially sighted people’s independence, forcing more reliance on friends, family or other sources of support like local community groups. In the worst cases, poor decisions leave people isolated and housebound. Nevertheless, some local authorities have developed innovative practice to support blind and partially sighted people to live independently which is making a real difference.



The research found that the main factors that helped or hindered blind and partially sighted people to live independent lives were:

- social care and high quality rehabilitation
- transport and the built environment
- employment (this is discussed in the chapter on “Fulfilling potential”).

Practical ways in which local authorities can make an impact around independence

- Strengthen **care pathways** and **preventative support** for blind and partially sighted people through adopting models of support such as **Eye Clinic Liaison Officers**.
- Enable blind and partially sighted people to **adjust to sight loss** more effectively and be supported to live independent lives by commissioning **adequate specialist rehabilitation** support. This support may not always be possible to deliver within a six-week programme of reablement and should be guided by the principle of 'time limited but not time bound' support.
- Work closely with local **voluntary sector organisations** and support them to provide specialist support to blind and partially sighted people.
- Empower blind and partially sighted people to be active citizens, find employment and stay well by continuing to invest in **concessionary travel schemes**.
- Avoid costly mistakes around the re-design of the built environment by **involving blind and partially sighted people** in future **planning decisions** through advisory panels or targeted consultation.
- Carry out **Equality Impact Assessments** to plans for street works to ensure they will not disadvantage blind and partially sighted residents.

2.1 Support for independent living

Blind and partially sighted people tend to receive a low level of statutory support from social care, because many do not meet minimum statutory thresholds (5). This is despite many blind and partially sighted people needing support for fundamental parts of life such as getting around, making a meal or personal care. The blind and partially sighted people we spoke to had developed a range of coping strategies with varying degrees of success. A clear message from this research was the need for local authorities to put in vital support, particularly to help newly diagnosed individuals. Where this happened it could make the difference between sinking or swimming.

In common with this national trend of low levels of social care involvement, the people we spoke to generally reported a **lack of contact with professionals in social care** after being diagnosed with their eye condition. After initial rehabilitation support or contact with a social worker, participants were usually left to “get on with things” themselves. There is also some evidence that the level of support people with sight loss receive is under threat as budgets are further squeezed in the current spending review.

However, some local authorities have fostered strong links between health and social care, resulting in more **joined-up care pathways** for blind and partially sighted people. Early intervention and preventative approaches empower blind and partially sighted people to access timely and tailored advice and support helping them to retain their independence. An example of how an Eye Clinic Liaison Officer (ECLO) is delivering more joined-up support is detailed below:

Plymouth’s Low Vision Community Liaison Worker

Plymouth has developed a new approach to support early intervention and smooth low vision care pathways. The **low vision community liaison post** arose from patients saying they had come out of the Eye Infirmary not knowing where to go or what support was available. There was a sense that people were “slipping through the net” between health and social care and not accessing the support they might need to help them adjust to their sight loss. A Commissioning Officer at Plymouth Council explains some of the reasons behind developing the new service:

“There is no reason why people should live without support. We wanted to strengthen links between health and social care so that people weren’t going home and not accessing support. This way we could pick people up earlier and identify the appropriate support.”

The low vision worker is based at the Royal Eye Infirmary and acts as a single point of contact taking a holistic approach to providing support and information working across many different areas. This is done through providing information at the eye clinic and during home visits as well as signposting people to different agencies for support with finances, equipment and mobility etc. There are clear referral pathways to the reablement team in Adult Social Care as well as the main voluntary sector organisation providing support to blind and partially sighted people in Plymouth. This is the model which ECLOs follow in a number of other areas across the country.

Independence

Those blind and partially sighted people that were receiving a service from social care often reported a **reduction in the support** available to them. Older people with complex needs that took part in this research said they were feeling the squeeze of the cuts. One man in sheltered housing told us:

“I don’t think any of us are aware of the full implications of the budget cuts that are on us, and when you think we have all worked and planned for the future, I never thought it would be like this.”

A strong finding from the research was that **cuts to sensory support teams** are adding to the sense of a vacuum of support from local authorities. Participants also reported that sensory support services are **moving from a specialist to a generic model** of provision in an attempt to reduce costs. These changes meant that often blind and partially sighted people lost their point of contact in the local authority or that the support became less specialist, and therefore less responsive, to the specific needs of blind and partially sighted people.

Despite the cuts and shrinking budgets, our good practice research shows that some local authorities are **coping creatively by redesigning services**, saving money in the process. The example below describes how South Tyneside Metropolitan Borough Council has used personalisation as a driving force to change how the needs of blind and partially sighted people are assessed and responded to.

Integrated working and personalisation in South Tyneside Metropolitan Borough Council

Within the Council, Adult Social Care teams have been restructured and there is now one team operating in the east of the area and one in the west. Integrated care for those who have physical and/or sensory needs is available from the age of 18 to end of life from both these teams. This move reflected feedback the council had from service users and the community who said they wanted to be able to contact just one team and have their needs met. As part of a pilot exploring personalisation, service users were invited to talk about their journeys through the local care system which gave the authority an invaluable insight on which they have drawn to refine and improve services.

As a result of feedback, the assessment process has been changed. There is now an initial contact team which provides basic advice and puts people through to the right service, referrals are screened and these feed into the self assessment questionnaire (SAQ). Questions on the SAQ have been changed so equipment and telecare needs are discussed upfront and if a piece of equipment can meet needs and maintain independence, the Council will provide it. The emphasis is on asking the individual what they want and need before beginning the formal assessment process – a clear example of personalisation.

Peter Bennetts, a local man who is registered blind and has worked with the Council to improve services highlights the value of the attitude of openness and personalised approach shown by staff and councillors at South Tyneside:

“At the end of the day it is about a willingness to work in a cooperative manner, to listen, to review, to improve, to change and I think South Tyneside Council have demonstrated that which has resulted in a positive outcome...I’m very grateful.”

Locally elected members play a significant role in driving forward these improvements within the Council. Together with partner organisations they are using personalisation as a lever for service improvement as Councillor Emma Lewell-Buck says:

“One of our greatest strengths is that we really have a handle on personal budgets. It can look good on paper but it is about showing its value, and selling it to service users, that is the real challenge... sometimes people perceive them as the local authority absolving their responsibility, but actually it is more about... giving people more control over their lives.”

Independence

Despite pockets of good practice, our research findings indicate that blind and partially sighted people may be **missing out on the potential benefits of personalisation**. Our research found little evidence of participants reporting they met the assessment criteria for a personal budget and many blind and partially sighted people did not know what a personal budget was.

As well as getting the initial assessment stage right, our research emphasised time and again the critical role that **high quality and timely rehabilitation** plays in supporting blind and partially sighted people to **retain their independence and become less dependent** on other people and services. Rehabilitation (now referred to by some local councils as reablement) is traditionally where blind and partially sighted people learn or re-learn skills to accommodate their sight loss such as mobility training, learning to read braille and independent living skills around the home. There were frequent examples cited by research participants of high quality rehabilitation provision commissioned by local authorities making a huge and sustained positive impact on their lives, particularly at the point of diagnosis and initial sight deterioration. A participant spoke about a rehabilitation course when she was first diagnosed:

“Coming on this course has been a godsend. I didn’t know about all the things which were available.”

Where rehabilitation was felt to be particularly effective it was commissioned by local authorities in a way that was needs-led, focused on outcomes and was “time limited but not time prescribed”.

Plymouth City Council's flexible approach to reablement

When an individual is registered as blind or partially sighted in Plymouth they are phoned to have a 'detailed conversation' with a social worker or occupational therapist. During the conversation the individual is invited to establish some desired outcomes which are important to them and their life. This triggers an internal referral to the Rehabilitation Officers for Adults with Visual Impairments (ROVIs), based within the home care reablement team. This is a very quick process with no waiting list as a ROVI explains:

"The certificate comes in, they have the conversation and the referral is made and we make contact with the person that day. There is no waiting list, we do 'today's work today'. I will go and visit the person and look at what support they need to meet their outcomes."

Starting from identifying outcomes means that support can be tailored and person-centred, driven by the priorities that are important to the individual. Reablement is a short-term intervention based on what the person needs and can include mobility training, putting in equipment and 'house enablers' to help develop new skills for independent living such as cooking and bathing. The support is not time limited so can be extended to meet the particular needs and circumstances of the individual:

"Reablement is not time limited which is important because everyone is different. Life is not like that so if you put a time limit on it you're saying you have to do it in a certain time. These are people that have lost their sight and you can't say 'It's going to take x amount of weeks'. Often it's a confidence thing – our job is to help them regain their independence and their confidence and you can't put a time on that." (ROVI)

Support can be offered in frequent, intensive ways such as every morning for a week or over longer periods of time, depending on the outcomes and needs of the individual.

However, there were numerous examples of **reductions to rehabilitation services** as well as existing services becoming more stretched. One parent in the South West spoke for many when she told us:

"More and more children are being diagnosed [with a visual impairment] so in my area there is a rehabilitation worker and an orientation officer to cover the whole of the county and they are being asked to cover more and more areas so me and my friends have found we're getting less and less contact."

Independence

The potential knock-on effects of less rehabilitation support are far-reaching. Less support means blind and partially sighted people may not learn the vital skills necessary to lead independent, active lives and make a full contribution to their families and communities.

Where early statutory support was not forthcoming, research participants reported they had **turned more to support from local charities** such as local societies for blind people or other third sector providers such as the Citizens Advice Bureau and RNIB, describing this support as critical. One partially sighted man echoed the view of many:

“If there isn’t anything like sensory support then you are left to the voluntary organisations to point you in the right direction.”

One recently diagnosed woman recounted how the support she received from a third sector organisation “made the world come to life for me.” However, the research suggests that reliance on third sector organisations may be increasingly precarious and risky as the funding base for these organisations is threatened by local budget cuts. **Squeezed budgets in the voluntary sector** (one local sight charity had experienced cuts of up to 40 per cent) meant particular posts and services within charities had been cut, as one young visually impaired person in the North East told us:

“They [a third sector provider] come out to help with regular stuff like doing your washing and cooking but now they are saying the funding might not be there to help us as much.”

Many participants expressed concern about their future if the support they received from local charities was cut back or stopped altogether. A number described situations where they were just about ‘getting by’ because of the small amount of support they could access through a charity – whether this was a social group, specialist equipment or help in the home. **People feared being tipped over from ‘managing’ into ‘not coping’ if future support was withdrawn.**

Voluntary sector organisations can be particularly effective at combining practical and emotional support, drawing on the strength, ideas and experiences of blind and partially sighted people and building networks between them. The example from a Plymouth based sensory support charity highlights this approach below:

Peer support following diagnosis

Plymouth City Council commissions Plymouth Guild to run a six week course for blind and partially sighted people to adjust to living with sight loss. The **Insight course** runs four times a year and was developed to provide timely support following a diagnosis of sight loss. Commissioners in adult social care and health reported that one of the gaps in provision was the initial support that could be given following diagnosis to try and help individuals adjust to a life without sight. The six week intensive course was established to provide practical and emotional support at this critical juncture.

The Council have found that providing information and peer support at this time means that blind and partially sighted people are more able to access the services they need and build up their own support networks. The course aims to give people back some confidence through providing information and promoting an environment of mutual support. A ROVI outlines the importance of the course:

“I think the Insight course is great. It’s really good for people to meet other people in a similar position. There are such knock on social implications to going blind. I often find that although people have got a wife, husband or parent and as hard as that person tries it’s not the same as talking to someone else that’s going through the same thing.”

Staff have found that peer support is an excellent way for group members to build confidence. People come up with their own ideas about how to adapt to sight loss and support each other with things like using a white cane for the first time which has a stigma attached to it for some people.

2.2 Transport

The research findings show that **being able to get out and about** and lead active lives was central to blind and partially sighted people’s sense of wellbeing and independence.

Although many of the people we spoke to relied on lifts from family and friends, public transport was absolutely crucial. Experiences of public transport varied depending on where people lived but also how local transport was provided.

Poorly thought through transport decisions had knock-on effects: restricting employment and volunteering opportunities, increasing costs and making blind and partially sighted people less confident to go out on their own.

Concessionary travel was seen as critical but also as a service that was vulnerable to budget cuts. One older participant from the Midlands, reflecting the views of many, told us about his bus pass: “We would die without them, they are so valuable, we use the buses twenty times a week.”

In one county, a concessionary bus pass for blind and partially sighted people had been stopped but recently reinstated due to local campaigning. In some areas concessionary travel did not join up across local authority areas, so if someone wanted to get the bus into town from a surrounding area across the authority boundary they would not get the benefits of the concessionary fare. In some rural areas, bus services to and from the nearest town or city had been reduced making it harder for blind and partially sighted people to get into town to find employment or access services.

Our research shows how the **attitude of bus drivers** is crucial in helping or preventing blind and partially sighted people from being able to get out and about. A number of blind and partially sighted people said they did not use buses because they could not count on a helpful driver who would wait until they had sat down before moving off or would let them know when to get off at their stop. One person in the North West told us about her experience of using the bus:

“I always sit there on tenterhooks - I am so worried they will forget and if I am dropped off at a different stop which is not mine, I am lost; I may as well be one hundred miles away”.

Having little or no sight means travellers have to rely on other people and drivers for support and support was not always forthcoming. In some cases, attitudes were distinctly negative with bus drivers not stopping if they saw a white cane or a guide dog and not helping blind and partially sighted passengers to purchase a ticket. One white cane user told us:

“Disability awareness for drivers needs to be pushed further – some are good but some don’t give a monkeys about how you get on the bus and whether they start up before you’ve sat down. You take pot luck some days.”

Because the role of bus driver is so critical in supporting blind and partially sighted people to travel independently, there was a suggestion that **transport staff could be trained** by blind and partially sighted people to better understand their needs and make small, cost-free changes to their practice.

Accessible travel

Where local areas were felt to be getting it right, for example in London and Nottingham, blind and partially sighted people described how **audio announcements** on buses meant they could travel with more confidence and without support. Other areas, like Bradford, have developed new technology enabling passengers to be sent bus departure times direct to their mobile phones.

Large print timetables, concessionary bus passes and taxi cards put in place by local authorities and travel providers all meant blind and partially sighted people could get about independently.

2.3 The built environment

The quality of the local built environment was a major factor in determining whether blind and partially sighted people were able to live independently.

Blind and partially sighted people told us that many of their **local areas were cluttered places** that for sighted people might not cause a problem but for them were very hazardous. Cars on pavements, overgrowing shrubbery and uneven paving meant that the people we spoke to felt like they were taking a chance every time they left their front door. One woman's feelings about this reflect the views of many:

“When the pavements are bad you don't stand a chance...You go out and feel worried you are going to trip over, I never go out and not worry.”

In some cases this had led to blind and partially sighted people **choosing not to go out** as they felt scared or intimidated. In other cases, research participants reported falling over and injuring themselves thereby requiring medical treatment.

The research shows how blind and partially sighted people are often forced to rely on more support and help from members of staff and the public in places such as supermarkets or galleries which were less accessible because of small signs or poor layout.

Local authorities have a unique position in shaping the built environment to make it accessible and safe for blind and partially sighted people and disabled residents more widely. Leicester City Council has taken an innovative and embedded approach to inclusive design putting the voice of disabled people and local councillors at the heart of the planning process. This approach has actually saved the Council money as it ensures the built environment and planning decisions are “got right the first time” rather than needing to be expensively re-designed when problems come to light.

Leicester City Council's Inclusive Design Advisory Panel

Leicester City Council are working in partnership with Vista, a voluntary sector organisation supporting blind and partially sighted people, and the Centre for Integrated Living to develop a programme of work to ensure the voice of blind and partially sighted people is heard in the planning and development stages of any built environment and public realm scheme.

The Council facilitates the Disabled Persons Access Group to ensure disability groups and disabled people get involved in activities, such as consultation exercises as well as running the **Inclusive Design Advisory Panel (IDAP)** which advises the council planners on the implications of their plans on disabled people.

All planning and design projects now come through the IDAP which is chaired by a councillor who has a keen interest in inclusive design. Before the panel's existence disabled people's access and built environment issues often got picked up too late, when projects were complete. Problems were then costly to rectify, and the resultant negative feedback impacted poorly on the council. The IDAP enables disabled people to take a more pro-active role at the planning stage, to help prevent issues from arising later on down the line.



3 Wellbeing

Promoting the wellbeing of residents is at the heart of the role of local authorities. Blind and partially sighted people told us they wanted to feel part of their local communities, connected to the people and environment around them and able to pursue interests and activities that meant something to them. The findings in this chapter show that where this was lacking, blind and partially sighted people risked becoming cut off from people and places around them and more vulnerable to mental health problems such as depression.

Practical ways in which local authorities can make an impact around wellbeing

- Guard against poor mental health and the social exclusion of blind and partially sighted people by **pro-actively supporting social connectedness**. This can be done by enabling blind and partially sighted people to set up social groups, attend clubs run by local voluntary groups and take part in inclusive sport and cultural activities.
- Protect and invest in **talking books, talking newspapers** and **library services** so that blind and partially sighted people can enjoy the world of reading, access important local communications and feel connected to the world around them.
- **Local councillors** can **promote locality budgets** with blind and partially sighted residents in order to help them innovate and build inclusive communities.

3.1 Social connectedness

The blind and partially sighted people we spoke to were clear about the things that had most impact on their happiness and wellbeing. In particular people emphasised how **the company of others** and **“feeling connected”** was vital.

On the flip side, not having opportunities to interact and form connections with others made people feel “low” and “isolated”, impacting negatively on mental health. For example one partially sighted woman told us: “When you are like this, relationships mean an awful lot; the most important thing is company.”

Feeling socially connected was important across all age groups but people of different ages relied on different ways to create these connections.

For the working age and younger people we spoke to, being in employment or education, along with volunteering were fundamental to creating and sustaining social connections. For many older and partially sighted people, attending a group with other blind and partially sighted people was an opportunity to share experiences and get support from others in a similar position.

One older woman who enjoyed eating out but was uncomfortable doing so by herself in public, attended a social group for blind and partially sighted people where she felt comfortable doing this: “They don’t treat me as though I am something the cat bought in. I feel comfortable with them.”

Despite the desire to spend time with other people, the research suggests that blind and partially sighted people face **a number of barriers** to being able to form the social connections so vital to happiness and wellbeing.

Although in general terms, being in education was vital for younger people to feel more connected, this was said to be harder in mainstream schools and colleges. Many of the young blind and partially sighted people we spoke to reported **feeling isolated** from their non-disabled peers. Social isolation amongst younger people was compounded by the fact that in some areas, groups for blind and partially sighted people only catered for older people, making them unsuitable for working age or younger people. Equally, working age and older blind and partially sighted people reported cuts to the funding of some support groups which had also impacted on the extent to which they could take part in them and feel connected. One group had their funding for transport cut, leaving them in the precarious and unsustainable position of being reliant on volunteers for this service.

Access to reliable transport prevented many people from making social connections. In two areas, cuts to the bus pass for blind and partially sighted people meant that passengers could not travel before 9.30am for free, and this prevented them from being able to take up work, or voluntary work opportunities, no matter how keen they were to take them on. Given the low incomes many blind and partially sighted people are on, concessionary travel was often the difference between whether someone could travel to an appointment, job, volunteering placement or have to stay at home.

Despite the challenges, a number of areas are supporting opportunities for blind and partially sighted people to meet people, feel connected and be more socially included. One school in Devon has introduced a **buddy scheme** where blind and partially sighted children are teamed up with different children each week in an effort to support inclusion. There were also examples of **enablers** or befrienders funded through the local authority. This meant blind or partially sighted children were able to attend mainstream leisure opportunities and groups with a little extra support.

One young man living in a rural area was so frustrated with the lack of appropriate social groups, he and other blind and partially sighted people set up their own support group, highlighted below.

Social inclusion for blind and partially sighted people

Four Swans Vision was established to provide support and social activities for blind and partially sighted people and it aims to address the loneliness and isolation felt by many blind and partially sighted people. The group meets monthly to exchange ideas and discuss issues with other blind and partially sighted people and provides opportunities to socialise and to participate in local activities such as visiting museums and theatres.

3.2 Culture, sport and leisure activities

For all of us, being able to enjoy taking part in cultural, sporting and leisure activities has consistently been demonstrated to be vital for a sense of personal wellbeing: including for good mental and physical health. For the blind and partially sighted people we spoke to the opportunity to take part in this kind of activity was even more vital, and indeed in many cases a **crucial lifeline and guard against depression**.

The people we spoke to took part in a range of activities such as badminton, tennis and bowls, travelling abroad, playing the piano, attending musical events, visiting the theatre or a gallery, reading and listening to the radio. Increased wellbeing from involvement in such activities came from a sense of being purposeful, being able to learn and achieve in spite of a diagnosis of sight loss. One partially sighted person captured the views of many when she said:

“Feeling as though you are able to achieve something is very important, and makes you think, ‘Right, what is the next thing I can do?’ These activities give your life meaning.”

Taking part in cultural, sporting or other leisure activities also provided the people we spoke to opportunities for **creating and sustaining social connections** – for example, one newly married woman met her husband through an activity group for blind and partially sighted people.

Wellbeing

A number of factors were identified which make it easier for blind and partially sighted people to take part in these kinds of activities. Features such as activity groups for blind and partially sighted people; assisted rail travel; concessionary travel; and technology such as adaptive computers and readers were all reported as invaluable. The value of **library services** and **RNIB's Talking Book Service** in facilitating access to reading and literature was highlighted by a number of those we spoke to, particularly in older age groups, as one recently diagnosed woman in the South East said: "I wouldn't be without the Talking Book Service."

There were also many barriers to participating in this kind of activity. For many, participation in cultural, sport and leisure activities was dependent on access to financial resources and to transport. Unemployment, reliance on benefits, and a lack of access to reliable transport links or a personal car proved a real barrier from taking part in activities, particularly for working age and younger people and those living in non-urban areas.

Recent cuts have affected the extent to which the people we spoke to were able to take part in activities they enjoyed. There was an example of cuts to a mobility library service and in a sheltered housing complex the activities coordinator post had been cut, profoundly limiting the number of activities residents participated in.

In many cases, a **lack of information** about what activities or services are available to assist blind and partially sighted people to participate as they would like was a big barrier. For example, one partially sighted woman who had recently learnt to play the piano only found about a service which enlarged sheet music by chance:

"Somebody passed a magazine under my arm which had an article about the RNIB sending music to a place in Devon to get it enlarged...this has given me the greatest pleasure, learning something again".

Some **local authorities** are using devolved budgets and their unique **role as place-shapers** to support blind and partially sighted people to create opportunities for themselves as one of our case study interviewees told us.



Locality budgets and devolved commissioning

Alex When, 26, frustrated by the lack of activities available for blind and partially sighted people in his area, set up his own tennis club. He found out through a leaflet sent around by a local councillor about the locality budget which invited applications for groups and local causes. Alex applied for funding through this budget and his tennis club was given £480 to help for one year's running costs. This small grant has made a big difference to the lives of young blind and partially sighted people in the area and has meant an increase in the number of activities for blind and partially sighted people locally in a time of cuts.



Alex thinks this way of local authorities giving funding directly to people wanting to start local initiatives is effective because it “cuts out the middle person ... and allows the funding to go directly to blind and partially sighted people where it's really needed.”

4 Fulfilling potential

This research confirms how much blind and partially sighted people want to fulfil their potential and make an active contribution to society, including through using their skills and experience in the workplace and acquiring new skills and knowledge through training and learning activities. As the findings described in this chapter show, blind and partially sighted people still face significant barriers to employment mainly relating to the unwillingness of employers to employ someone with a visual impairment. In schools and colleges, the support provided by local authorities in the form of Qualified Teachers of Visually Impaired (QTVIs) is critical but in some cases being eroded leaving blind and partially sighted people struggling to get the education they deserve.

Practical ways in which local authorities can make an impact around supporting blind and partially sighted people to fulfil their potential and make an active contribution

- Support blind and partially sighted children and young people in education to fulfil their potential by providing **adequate levels of QTVI and visual impairment support**.
- Use the **changes outlined in the SEN and Disability Green paper** to work with schools, colleges, families and the voluntary sector to create **more supportive learning environments**, responsive to the needs of visually impaired learners.
- **In developing their local offer** for children with special educational needs and disabilities, **engage specialist visual impairment services** to ensure the “local offer” comprises core services learners with a visual impairment require.
- Facilitate the **sharing of good practice amongst teachers and teaching assistants** so that all schools and colleges can learn how best to support their visually impaired learners.
- Support **local social enterprises** and voluntary sector organisations to work with **local employers** to **raise awareness** of sight loss issues and tackle discrimination.
- **Reinvigorate** the **Council’s own knowledge** about what **reasonable adjustments** can be put in place to support blind and partially sighted employees, **looking for Access to Work support** at the recruitment, retention and progression stages.

- Use **Article 19 of the** European Union procurement directive, which **allows public bodies** to reserve **contracts** for supported businesses that provide **employment opportunities for disabled people**, including those with sight loss.
- Use the Council's **commissioning** and **procurement role** to monitor the practice of sub-contractors and ensure they are disability positive in their employment practices.

4.1 Learning

Getting a good education is essential to improving life chances and this research confirms how important education and learning are for blind and partially sighted people. For many people we spoke to, education was also seen as fundamental in securing future employment as well as providing the opportunity to make friends and feel part of something.

Young people and parents felt strongly that if children and young people with a visual impairment do not have the opportunity to progress academically, they will experience an even greater disadvantage in the labour market and be socially disadvantaged. One employed partially sighted woman echoed the views of many when she told us that not having a good education would: “turn being visually impaired into a ‘life-long handicap’”.

Access to a good education was thought of as **vital to fulfil potential, progress and succeed, and to personally develop**. Through education young people had the opportunity to be independent from their parents, to socialise and establish a group of friends.

There are an estimated 22,000 blind and partially sighted children and young people aged 0-16 years in England. **Approximately 70 per cent of blind and partially sighted children are educated in mainstream settings, with the remainder being in special schools (6)**. Visual impairment is a low incidence disability so it is essential that blind and partially sighted children's needs are picked up early and support put into place as soon as possible.

The new approach to special educational needs outlined in the SEN and Disability green paper, **Support and aspiration**, reflects the shift to a more integrated and holistic assessment and support planning process. SEN statements will be replaced by Education, Health and Care Plans. The new approach to special educational needs and disability also means local authorities will publish a ‘local offer’ showing the support available to disabled children and young people and those with SEN, and their families.

Fulfilling potential

The benefits of getting the right support to assist with learning was articulated by Mikey, 17, who took part in one of our case study interviews:

At West of England College in Devon where Mikey currently studies, he receives a lot of support and equipment to help with his visual impairment, supported by his local authority. The school itself also gets involved in a lot of fundraising activities to support their learners.

West of England School is a boarding school and due to the transport difficulties in his immediate area Mikey spends his week boarding at the school and goes home on the weekends. Mikey, who previously attended a mainstream school, thinks that mainstream schools work best for visually impaired children when they give them the right level of support to help them fully take part in learning.

This research confirmed that without the much needed **support in mainstream settings**, parents and young blind and partially sighted people told us they were not always able to participate and fulfil their potential. Parents of children with a visual impairment stressed that support does not always require huge investment but if missing the result is potentially devastating. A number of parents reported that support in mainstream settings was lacking, and this poorly affected their son or daughter's educational outcomes and well-being more generally. Examples of useful support included mobility training with other children in the school and IT equipment. The central **importance of Qualified Teachers of Visually Impaired (QVTIs)** was highlighted. These teachers work directly with learners and make assessments of the types of support pupils might need and advise on adjustments within the school or college environment.

As well as support, parents and young people also reported a number of barriers to learning. Parents felt **local authority cuts had diminished the level of support** available. Staff had increased workloads and less time to help individual families. One parent explained:

“It feels like they can't respond because they've had cut backs...Someone retired and was then replaced and now they've gone. It's not that they are not well intentioned - they are lovely people but their case loads are so enormous.”

Parents also reported a **reduction in the amount of QVTI support** their children were getting. Increased referrals to the service and cutbacks to administrative staff meant that QVTIs had to spend more of their time on administration. This resulted in restrictions to the amount of time they could spend with each child. This caused anxiety for the children and young people who were used to receiving a certain level of support, particularly during already stressful periods, such as exam time.

The more integrated approach supported by the green paper reflects aspirations from parents of visually impaired children that had been through the **statementing process** to secure additional support from the local authority for their child's special needs with minimum complication. These parents said it had been an adversarial process. The process was described as confusing and as a 'fight', with local authorities starting off from a position of wanting to offer the bare minimum rather than jointly exploring what support was needed with families. This was the view of a number of the parents we spoke to and one mother with a partially sighted daughter summed it up as:

"My daughter has 35 hours of one-to-one support, six hours from a QTVI and one hour mobility so in that sense we're very lucky but that took a fight. It took nearly two years to get a statement and to get the statement how we wanted it."

Despite the difficult climate, there are examples of education providers that have put in place measures, sometimes at no or little extra cost to ensure their blind and partially sighted pupils can learn and progress to their full potential.

Supporting visually impaired children and young people in education

The young people we spoke to who attended a higher education college in Newcastle were given mobility training and this college had recently employed a mobility advisor to support this practice. The college has a number of support staff, whose role it is to assist the learners with a visual impairment around the campus and to take notes in lectures.

Lecturers show an awareness of how to support their blind and partially sighted learners by taking a number of simple measures such as sending these learners the lecture slides ahead of a lecture, to help them feel prepared.

A parent of a visually impaired teenager commented:

"People don't realise how much is involved and [visually impaired] children are put in the deep end. But small changes can make a huge difference."

4.2 Employment

Whilst local authorities do not have a direct remit for employment, there are still vital actions councils can take to empower their blind and partially sighted residents to be able to find and retain employment for example in their own employment practices and in the area of transport.

Fulfilling potential

Employment was seen by the blind and partially sighted people we spoke to as having a number of different and interrelated benefits: improving a person's financial situation, increasing self esteem and independence, giving a sense of purpose and identity and providing opportunities for social interactions. For example a partially sighted person said:

“Having a visual impairment and being in employment is brilliant, it's what gives me my sense of identity, I can't imagine not working.”

Despite the benefits of employment and the fact that young and working age blind and partially sighted people want to work, employment opportunities and experiences were reported as very rare.

The unemployed and employed people we spoke to identified multiple barriers associated with getting and staying in a job, including having access to appropriate support to maintain employment as well as opportunities to progress in a chosen career. Other barriers to work commonly reported included: experiences of workplace bullying; worries about financial vulnerability caused by coming off benefits; the amount of time it takes for Access to Work schemes to secure the appropriate support, and the ineffectiveness of disability employment advisors due to lack of awareness of sight specific issues. One blind woman told us:

“These are all things the government says they do, but when it comes to the crunch...it takes ages to get it ...why would they employ me if they can get someone else who can be up and running quickly?”

The most significant barrier to employment, however, was said to be the **unwillingness of employers to employ blind and partially sighted people** because of the perceived 'hassle' and extra money it would take to make the reasonable adjustments needed. This barrier was seen as getting bigger due to the recession and the increased number of people seeking employment. As one partially sighted man said:

“The climate now with many people needing jobs – there's not much incentive for employers to employ disabled people. I think a lot of employers would think it is too much hassle to go through this and this and this. If we're at the bottom of the pile, we'll be pushed down even further”.

The current economic climate posed a number of challenges for staying in work such as moving buildings due to restructuring, the introduction of 'hot desking', cuts to administrative support and having a bigger workload.

Access to Work was described as essential to helping blind and partially sighted people stay in work and therefore those we spoke to were alarmed by changes to the scheme which meant that employers would have to pay a greater amount of the cost of equipment, which could deter them from employing people with sight loss in the future.

The cut to the bus pass for blind and partially sighted people in some areas meant that people of working age were no longer able to travel for free before 9.30am and led one partially sighted woman to conclude “this means disabled people don’t work, according to the council”.

The blind and partially sighted people in employment we spoke to described staying in employment and getting the appropriate support to continue to do your job as “a fight”. A strong message from the research was that employed people with a visual impairment felt they had to work harder than their colleagues to prove themselves and to keep on top of their workloads. They were reluctant to ask their employers for extra support or up to date equipment which would help them do their jobs more efficiently through a fear they would be



considered too much of a burden and it would be “used against them”. This fear was exacerbated in the current financial climate because there was a sense that you should feel ‘lucky’ that you had a job:

“It feels like the cuts are affecting morale as well, because you feel like you can’t complain as you might be told you can take it or leave it.”

With this prevailing atmosphere, the reality for blind and partially sighted people of finding and keeping a job seems all too slim. Most of the people taking part in this research that were in **employment were employed in jobs relating to sight loss or disabilities or more widely for the public or voluntary sectors.**

The impact of the recession and spending cuts on the public and voluntary sector as employers leaves many blind and partially sighted people even further from the possibility of a job. Despite this, there are steps that local authorities can take to improve their own practice as disability equality employers, supporting disabled young people or jobseekers through work experience programmes and internships and looking at what extra steps they can take to help disabled employees progress at work.

In South Tyneside, the local visual impairment charity, Sight Services is pioneering a new way to support blind and partially sighted people into employment, as shown below.

Supporting employment through social enterprise

Sight Services, a local voluntary sector organisation in South Tyneside have recently expanded their remit and set up a social enterprise called Angel Eyes Enterprise (North East). The charity specifically chose a social enterprise as they believed this model would be more effective than a traditional charity in employing blind and partially sighted people and encouraging them to volunteer. The social enterprise model enables blind and partially sighted people to be the 'face' of the organisation and to have ownership over it.

Angel Eyes is for blind and partially sighted people of working age who want to find and (crucially) create employment and volunteering opportunities. The worsening economic situation and the cuts in the public and voluntary sector meant that the charity felt a focus on employment was even more crucial for blind and partially sighted people of working age. Angel Eyes will also deliver training to schools and businesses to raise awareness of visual impairments and break down barriers to employment and training locally.

Encouraging social enterprises is one of South Tyneside Council's targets and Sight Services have received crucial support from the Economic Development Team at the council to set up and run the social enterprise. This has included the council paying for legal assistance to set up the company, marketing and consultancy support and help with writing the business plan. Now fully established, Angel Eyes are able to access support from the team at the council on an ongoing basis.

Among different activities to date, Angel Eyes has produced a visual awareness DVD, taught visual awareness to school children, college and university learners and local authority staff and established a ten week programme centred around employment and volunteering. See

<http://sightservice.co.uk/index.php/angel-eyes-enterprise> for more details.

5 Keeping informed

Blind and partially sighted people told us they wanted to be kept informed about and contribute to, the world around them. Research findings show that the Talking Newspaper services in particular helped blind and partially sighted people stay in touch with national and local news helping them to feel part of society.

Despite this, blind and partially sighted people often reported not being able to have access to information and that they found out about services by chance, through lucky encounters and sometimes after years of not knowing about a local service.

Most research participants highlighted the severely limited “window of opportunity” that exists for information giving at the stage of being registered as blind or partially sighted. The research shows blind and partially sighted people want more information about what is available and what to expect at this stage of their sight loss journey to help them maintain their independence and make the most of their abilities.

Practical ways in which local authorities can make an impact around accessible information

- Help recently diagnosed blind and partially sighted people to access the support and information they need by developing a **seamless registration process** between health and social care so that no one falls through the cracks.
- Make certain that the **registration process involves the pro-active provision of information** from the council which carries a valuable preventative function and helps people with sight loss live as informed, empowered citizens.
- Convene multi-agency groups such as Plymouth’s Low Vision Group, to **map out care pathways, information gaps** and support collaborative working between commissioners, providers and people with sight loss.
- Eliminate discrimination by **delivering council information in formats that blind and partially sighted residents can actually read**. The most effective way for councils to fulfill their obligations under the Equality Act 2010 would be to **systematically record their residents’ preferred reading formats** so they can routinely send information in a way that meets their individual needs.

5.1 Getting information

The research shows that diagnosis and registration offers a critical ‘window of opportunity’ for the timely provision of information, which in many cases is sadly lacking. Participants also told us they wanted multiple opportunities to receive information from their local council, not simply a one-off communication at the early stages of sight loss.

A strong finding from the research was that the **Talking Newspaper services** were of great importance to blind and partially sighted people. A view expressed by one partially sighted woman from London and shared by many:

“To know that 15-20 volunteers are going in and reading the news out [for the talking newspaper] makes you feel that someone thinks it is of value that we know what is going on...[usually] so many things that happen diminish us.”

However, across all of the groups taking part in the research access to information for blind and partially sighted people was problematic. There was a **large degree of reliance on third sector organisations** for information about what support was available locally due to the paucity of accessible information from local statutory services. Local societies of blind people were often the first port of call for advice and information and national organisations like the Citizens’ Advice Bureau and RNIB’s support line were also frequently used for advice and legal information. Through these organisations blind and partially sighted people found out essential information to support them in their lives such as free access to directory enquiries, blind people’s tax allowance, concessionary bus passes and reduced costs for TV licences. Blind and partially sighted people’s reliance on voluntary sector organisations as the main source of information points to its precarious nature as the funding base of these organisations is at risk of being eroded. This has potentially dire consequences given the lack of accessible information in other domains.

We also heard how getting information from the local council **doesn’t need to be difficult** for blind and partially sighted people. An example of the big impact when a council gets it right is provided through the experience of John Wilson, 87, a resident in Lambeth, South London who we interviewed as part of this research:

Providing information at the right time

Once John had been registered blind, he was put in touch with the Sensory Services Team which provides services and equipment (subject to eligibility criteria) to residents with visual impairment in the London Borough of Lambeth.



The hospital had passed the council John's details so he could be registered as blind. The council contacted John, helping him to understand his new rights and providing him with information about the services available to him. John was told that he was allowed a greater personal allowance before income tax and an Attendance Allowance and he was made aware of the equipment and resources available from RNIB on Judd Street.

The council also registered John as a member of Dial-a-Ride (a free transport service for those with disabilities), a member of the Taxicard scheme (subsidised transport in taxis and private-hire vehicles for people who have serious mobility or visual impairment) and got him a Blue Badge parking permit, for use when he is out with his family.

John received a follow up phone call sometime later with the offer of further help, but he did not feel it necessary. John says he has had "no problems whatsoever" with the council since he was registered blind and speaks very highly of his experience:

"If you ever need anything, any time at all, I phone up the Sensory Team and they will sort it out. They deal with people with the loss of various senses and I have never had a problem [with them]."

John's experience shows how a proactive offer of information by a local authority can quickly put small support in place for individuals making their transition to living without sight much easier.

Inaccessible written information is still a problem for many blind and partially sighted people who reported they were still receiving written correspondence from GPs and other services in 'regular' formats whereas they needed communications in large print, email, audio or braille in order to read them. Participants across different groups highlighted the problem from local authorities as well as health providers:

"I got a big pack from my local authority of A4 paper, which isn't helpful when you have been registered blind and can't read again."

"I find it annoying that my local hospital's sight service don't send out letters in larger print...even just the appointment time and date."

However, there were **examples of where local authorities adapted their communication** to make it accessible. One partially sighted woman in London had been sent a pack of information in large print from Tower Hamlets sensory impairment service with lots of relevant local information. Examples such as this show how with some awareness and small adjustments, local authorities can support blind and partially sighted citizens to be informed citizens, taking charge of their own affairs and lives.

5.2 Joined up information and support

With the right information, blind and partially sighted people can access the advice and support they need to lead purposeful and fulfilling lives.

Joan, 64, interviewed for this research explains what a difference the right information and support makes:

Practical information and emotional support when you need it most

When Joan's eyesight became worse and she was registered as blind, the doctor strongly recommended that she let someone come to see her to help her cope with her sight loss. Joan agreed and told us, with a voice full of emotion, about how SAVI (Surrey Association for Visual Impairment) came into her life: "It was the best piece of advice ever."

SAVI have helped Joan physically and emotionally, she has received advice, information and support, undertaken mobility training, been offered counselling and been shown a range of aids for use around the home, all of which mean she can continue to live independently and remain active at home, despite her sight loss.

The research findings strongly suggest that blind and partially sighted people often experience **blocks in information and communication between services**. This results in either a vacuum of support or fragmented information about what support is available – often at the very time when it is needed the most. Blind and partially sighted people can be left feeling isolated and confused. One older woman told us: "I didn't feel like social services cared, so I ploughed my own furrow."

Many blind and partially sighted people told us of how little information or advice they were given on being diagnosed or registered as blind or partially sighted:

"The council didn't come looking for us and we didn't find out about them".

"My main complaint is that there are services around but nobody comes and tells you about them."

In many cases a strong link between health services and the local authority responsible for registering people as blind or partially sighted was missing.

Conversely, where links were strong between services and information flowed between them blind and partially sighted people were able to get the advice and support they needed. In these cases, **clear care pathways** from diagnosis to support were underpinned by **joint commissioning** and involved blind and partially sighted people as “experts by experience” as the example below describes:

Plymouth’s multi-agency Low Vision Group

Commissioners, service providers, practitioners and service users meet on a quarterly basis in Plymouth to discuss issues relating to sight loss. The group is called the Low Vision Group and includes: commissioners from Adult Social Care, managers from Plymouth Guild (the main voluntary sector organisation working with sensory impairment in the city), ROVIs, health practitioners, clinicians and nurses from the Royal Infirmary Hospital, members from Action for Blind People, a national charity, individuals working with learning disabled people, and a children’s mobility worker (to support transitions).

The group meets to map out care pathways, look at where there are gaps, share best practice and resolve issues. Members update each other on service developments and share strategies for service improvement and this information informs future commissioning decisions. The group set their terms of reference and objectives and there are also plans to involve service users in the group in the future. One ambition is to influence the local joint strategic needs assessment.

The Low Vision Group is a sub-group of the multi-agency Physical and Sensory Disability Board which is a strategic board made up of commissioners and providers. The Low Vision Group has deliberately been kept separate to ensure that visual impairment issues do not get ‘lost’ in wider disability-related issues. Maggie Paine, Assistant Chief Executive of Plymouth Guild explains why this is important:

“I think it’s good that it is separated out because there are some very specific issues. If you can’t see then you have very different issues to someone that can who is disabled. It’s about communication and mobility... As human beings we spend a lot of our lives to communicate with each other so a sensory impairment is different.”

6 Treated equally

Research findings show that being treated equally and with respect is of vital importance to blind and partially sighted people. Where this happens, research participants told us they felt **valued and included in their communities** and were free to reach their full potential. Many blind and partially sighted people were keen to relate how members of the public or helpful professionals have gone out of their way to help them and understand their experiences.

However, despite blind and partially sighted people having a 'protected characteristic' under the Equality Act 2010 and therefore being protected under law, the evidence collected throughout this research points to countless examples of where blind and partially sighted people have been **discriminated against, suffered abuse or not had their needs or capabilities understood** because of other people's prejudice or lack of awareness.

Practical ways in which local authorities can make an impact around equality

- Achieve greater disability equality through **local councillors acting as champions** of blind and partially sighted people **guided by a clear, embedded action plan**. Local councillors can raise awareness of specific issues through 'Awareness events' such as those staged by Leicester City Council.
- Identify within the council's own policies and practices what is preventing disability equality from happening and incentivise or reward individual actions taken to eliminate discrimination or promote equality of opportunity.
- Run **simulations for local councillors and council officers** where individuals are able to experience what it is like to live with sight loss. The experiential nature of these sessions have the potential to radically **alter perceptions of sight loss** and help to support more intelligent commissioning.
- Make the process clear, straightforward and accessible for blind and partially sighted people to **feedback their experience of local authority staff and services**. This would include if someone with a visual impairment felt they had been treated unfairly or discriminated against by the local authority or if they had a particularly positive experience which they wanted the council to build on.

6.1 Discrimination

The most common area for discrimination was in the workplace. Many blind and partially sighted people taking part in this research had been **victims of bullying**. One woman in Norfolk related her experience at work:

“I’ve had four jobs and in all of them I’ve been bullied. Two of them were jobs I was really enjoying and in my last job the line manager didn’t like me and she didn’t like my guide dog. At the time, her ‘get out clause’ was to do lots of lots of weekly reports and put me on disciplinary action to get me out and in the end she did get me out. So I wrote a letter saying it was too stressful for me and I haven’t worked since 1998.”

A similar story of **bullying, discrimination and prejudice** was related by Anne, who was interviewed for this research:

Anne has actively looked for work many times but feels that when an employer discovers a candidate is blind or partially sighted, barriers go up:

“They fear they’ll have to adapt their workplace, that we won’t be as quick or productive, or that other people will have to do part of our job... People also fear blindness... they think ‘if I couldn’t see I couldn’t do anything’ and they transfer that onto the blind person... I have been denied interviews before because I would have to go upstairs to get to the interview! So? I do that every day!”



Anne explains some of the attitudes she has encountered when looking for employment:

“I think it is hard even to get work experience as a blind person, perhaps more so than with other disabilities. I think there are very serious prejudices against blind people, from both employers and people in general. They think that we can’t get upstairs, read or write, do this or that... I’ve never got into a job then changed people’s minds because of how good I am, mainly because I’ve not really been let in anywhere where people were sceptical about me.”

Treated equally

Most blind and partially sighted people put their failure to get a job down to discrimination in the workplace. Blind and partially sighted people were keen to highlight they had been given opportunities as volunteers but these roles rarely led to paid employment. One woman qualified to post-graduate level in the North West told us:

“It’s like no one wants to give you the chance to show them...there are jobs you can do out there...if we can do it for voluntary then we can do it for paid, so really it is unfair we will be taken on for voluntary and not taken on for pay. I think that’s really wrong.”

These barriers mean that a large, able and motivated workforce is prevented from working forcing an increased and unwanted reliance on family members and the state.

Discrimination and prejudice were also experienced from **bus drivers** when blind and partially sighted people tried to use public transport. This was a common experience with blind and partially sighted people reporting they had been: accused of using concessionary fares improperly, left waiting at the curb by drivers who saw a white cane or a guide dog or suffered verbal harassment as an older blind man spoke of:

“I needed help getting a bus ticket and the driver said, ‘Bloody hell do I have to do it all?’”

Being treated without respect or dignity was also experienced by blind and partially sighted people in **health-based settings**, although to a lesser extent. Examples related to when people were diagnosed with their eye condition. One woman said when she went to the eye clinic, the doctor looked at her eyes and said “there is nothing we can do for you, but be very thankful you don’t have AIDS.” Another older woman said that when the doctor identified her sight loss, he did not speak to her but only to her daughter:

“He [the doctor] said, ‘She’s got glaucoma, she’ll have to put drops in everyday.’ He didn’t tell me, it was like I am a non-entity because I can’t see.”

Stories such as these show how not being able to see in some people’s minds corresponds to being less of a person, not afforded proper respect.

Where attitudes are positive and there is a good understanding of the issues facing blind and partially sighted people it makes the world of difference and can reduce costs creating a win-win situation for blind and partially sighted people and local authorities. New ways of working and a positive attitude have been fundamental to achieving this in South Tyneside as described below:

Shaping positive attitudes

In South Tyneside Metropolitan Borough Council, the Council Officer with responsibility for sensory impairments has been seconded to the local voluntary sector organisation, Sight Service. This has helped to develop positive attitudes at all levels of the local authority as the Chief Executive of the charity explains:

“Things have changed over time...we have always had a very good working relationship with council officers and councillors...but we have developed suggestions and proposals for working more closely and have seen the benefits. If you look across the UK, having council staff seconded and working to our team is very rare, but it works very well.”

Harnessing the resource and potential of blind and partially sighted people to co-design services is a central ethos of the approach South Tyneside have adopted and this also helps to raise awareness and tackle discrimination.

In the past, social care services have operated via systems and processes imposed from the top-down and the journey for service users has been at times, overly rigid. South Tyneside have used personalisation, drawing on national policy and evidence from across the UK to drive forward a fresh person-centred approach. One example of this is how the council conducted a consultation process (the Big Care Debate) where people in receipt of social care services were invited to participate. The consultation was to shape the authorities' response to both budget cuts and the implementation of personalisation and increase understanding of how these changes would impact upon local residents. At this event, blind and partially sighted service users (amongst other individuals) were invited to take part in the pilot of personalised services for people with sensory disabilities.

The pilot led to an open and honest discussion relating to the journey of service users through local care systems giving the authority invaluable insights on which they have drawn to refine and improve services, including how care assessments are carried out.

6.2 Awareness

A strong message from the research was that staff working in public services often **lack awareness** of what being blind or partially sighted people means for individuals. This means that without any intentional harm or malice, decisions can get made which have a negative impact on blind and partially sighted people. A young person in the North East reflected more widely held views when he said: “Often staff aren’t aware how to assist visually impaired people.”



Blind and partially sighted people taking part in this research felt that, at times, this lack of awareness resulted in **ill-thought through decisions** in how professionals interacted with them and about service provision more widely. There was a call across all research participants for local councillors and those responsible for public services to ‘walk in our shoes’. It was felt this would help those in positions of power and influence to more deeply understand the experience and barriers faced by people with visual impairments. One woman from the Midlands captured this sentiment:

“I think they should take our place for a little while and then they would see, because you can’t put it into words”.

Blind and partially sighted people themselves were involved in a number of awareness raising campaigns and initiatives. This included delivering visual impairment awareness sessions to public and private sector organisations and children in schools and colleges as one woman who is registered blind told us:

“We raise awareness of visual impairment and what it means, we do practical exercises to show them what the issues are for blind and partially sighted people and how difficult it is without sight. The reaction from them has been great... especially the younger ones.”

One of our local authority case studies was in the fourth year of delivering awareness-raising events with councillors and council staff to promote better understanding of the access issues facing blind and partially sighted people. The example below describes the method and impact of this innovative practice.

Leicester City Council Access Awareness Events

Leicester City Council runs Access Awareness Events primarily for councillors and council staff to raise awareness and understanding of inclusive design and access issues. The events are aimed at getting inclusive design on the agenda of all the relevant individuals from across the council, particularly councillors and strategic level planners and designers from the highways, community, and licensing departments. The events provide an opportunity for participants to both experience doing everyday things with an impairment and learn how that impairment disables people. Participants talk to blind and partially sighted people themselves about the issues and barriers they face. Organisers take a group of approximately eight people and provide them with information on the general principles of inclusive design, they are shown how to use a cane and how guide dogs respond to various aspects of the external built environment. Rehabilitation officers from Vista simulate the experiences of a blind or partially sighted person by asking participants to wear specially engineered goggles with bubble-wrap; they then take them for walks around the city to ensure they experience the different spaces and surfaces. They are shown the common access issues faced by partially sighted people, such as street cafes, bollards, and street furniture. The Disabled Access Officer told us about the way the events changed participants' attitudes:

“During one demonstration we had a person from the highways department say ‘who put that stupid pole there’ our answer was ‘you!’ It was quite an eye-opener for him.”

To date the event participant feedback has been very positive and there is now a regular programme of events which is in its fourth year of delivery.

Conclusion

This important national research programme has shown how much blind and partially sighted people have to offer to local places and communities, as active citizens leading rich and purposeful lives.

It has also shown how much local authorities can make a valuable difference with apparently small but significant changes to local services and the local area itself. By ensuring that transport, information, the built environment and things like leisure activities are accessible to blind and partially sighted people, and that local societies and key preventative and rehabilitative services are supported, councils can help to transform lives.

There's a real risk here too. If these modest changes are not made, or if things like this are actually withdrawn, then the social and financial cost will be massive. Blind and partially sighted people will – in very many cases – no longer be able to cope, and the cost to local services for health, social care and other support will spiral.

This research has showcased many simple practical steps that local authorities across the country can and should take to transform the lives of blind and partially sighted citizens. But of course in the face of some of the most challenging financial pressures to have faced the UK in decades, there is also a need for councils to take more radical steps to make the best possible use of ever dwindling resources and to avoid disabled people being hit hardest.

Below is a concluding analysis of some of the key strategic, cross-cutting actions that councils should seriously consider adopting in order to ensure that the needs of blind and partially sighted residents can be met during the continuing period of austerity.

Understanding need and impact

In the world of fiercely competing priorities for much less money, it's truer than ever that only the things that are counted count.

By systematically collecting, monitoring and analysing data about the needs of blind and partially sighted people in a local area, councils can ensure that key decisions are made in a way that has the best (or least worst) impact. This also means integrating consideration of blind and partially sighted people specifically into mainstream data collection and analysis exercises such as the Joint Strategic Needs Assessment and the Joint Health and Wellbeing Strategy.

As well as collecting data about need, councils should also strongly consider evaluating existing services from the point of view of their impact upon blind and partially sighted people. By establishing monitoring frameworks based around simple jointly agreed evaluation criteria, councils can help to demonstrate the impact of innovation over time, ensuring that a strong business case can be made.

Listening, engaging, involving, enabling

The message that blind and partially sighted people themselves must be at the centre of any decision making or reform that affects them came through loud and clear from this research. Involvement and engagement needs to be close, ongoing, and started early enough to be meaningful in terms of influencing decisions.

In practice, effective involvement can be achieved through a range of means, and the choice in a particular case should always reflect the specific needs of the people involved. But as a minimum, councils should look to make the invitations to get involved in consultation exercises, and the information provided throughout accessible to blind and partially sighted people, and use engagement methods that blind and partially sighted people find more comfortable, such as telephone conferencing.

Wherever possible, involvement is 'most real' where the power to make decisions independently is shared too: choice rather than just voice.

We saw in some of our good practice case studies how services can be improved significantly – including being made better value for money – if blind and partially sighted people are involved on an ongoing basis in the process of commissioning those services. We also saw examples of where councils had given blind and partially sighted people a position of influence as 'experts by experience', for example as valued members of strategic decision making boards.

Decision making and assessment

Consideration of the needs of blind and partially sighted people – or in fact any disabled people – should never be a 'bolt on' or a tick box exercise. In order to have real influence, equality impact assessment processes should be integrated into mainstream decision making. This makes good business sense – there are over 11 million disabled people in the UK. Around one in 20 children, one in seven working age adults and almost one in two people over state-pension age are disabled, so any policy or local decision making is likely to affect disabled people in some way (7).

Conclusion

One effective way of ensuring that the needs of blind and partially sighted people make a real impact on council decision making would be to set a high level strategic objective – implemented through measures by different departments suitable to their area of work – that directly benefits blind and partially sighted people. Given the fundamental importance of accessible information, councils should seriously consider making a commitment to recording every residents' preferred reading format by a given date.

Procurement, partnerships and commissioning

Using scarce resources for the maximum benefit of blind and partially sighted people inevitably means thinking carefully about procurement and commissioning processes, and the partnerships with providers and other organisations that underpin them.

The passage into law of the Public Services (Social Value) Act in March 2012 means that the ability to demonstrate the social value of key commissioning decisions is more crucial than ever.

Councils must first and foremost understand the experiences that blind and partially sighted people have of using services, and the pathways (for example from hospital care to rehabilitative support) that blind and partially sighted people travel between services. This understanding will help to develop service specifications that have the most chance of avoiding costly assumptions about the best way to meet people's needs, and the maximum chance of getting a good service.

Throughout the commissioning process councils should look to act in a genuine partnership with the specialist voluntary and community groups that provide so much valued support to blind and partially sighted people. Organisations like this understand that because of the tough economic times they need to change too, but need to be given the maximum chance to make these changes, by being involved in a real two-way dialogue early on.

More radically still, councils should actively consider the opportunity for social enterprises and other independent community and/or service user-led and owned organisations to take on the provision of services used by disabled people.

Raising awareness at all levels

We heard time and again how the attitudes of people providing services or support – whether bus drivers, teachers, employers or others – was a crucial factor in determining blind and partially sighted people’s levels of confidence and happiness. Being blind or partially sighted brings with it experiences and challenges that are easy for non-disabled people to overlook. Councils should therefore seriously consider awareness raising for councillors, senior officers, managers and frontline staff that allows them to experience the day-to-day reality of being blind and partially sighted.

There is clearly a need for councils to take these more radical steps to make the best possible use of ever dwindling resources and to avoid disabled people being hit hardest.

Footnotes

1. NHS Information Centre for Health and Social Care.
2. The survey questions were asked via the TNS Online Omnibus to 1009 adults aged 16-64 in Great Britain between 27 and 31 March 2008.
3. RNIB, 2011: **More than meets the eye: why the welfare cuts will hit blind and partially sighted people particularly hard.**
4. Commission for Social Care Inspection, 2008: **Cutting the cake fairly: CSCI review of eligibility criteria for social care.**
5. RNIB, 2011: **More than meets the eye: why the welfare cuts will hit blind and partially sighted people particularly hard.**
6. Morris and Smith (2008) **Educational provision for blind and partially sighted children and young people in Britain, 2007.** National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) for RNIB.
7. Office for Disability Issues, HM Government, accessed June 2012 at: <http://odi.dwp.gov.uk/disability-statistics-and-research/disability-facts-and-figures.php#gd>

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