



# Quick wins... and missed opportunities

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



supporting blind and partially sighted people



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We would like to thank everyone who shared the personal stories that have contributed to this report. Their views do not necessarily reflect the views of RNIB or OPM but they are strongly held and can only hint at the everyday difficulties blind and partially sighted people experience in their lives.

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**



# Quick wins... and missed opportunities

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](https://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.”



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## Footnotes

1. NHS Information Centre for Health and Social Care.
2. The survey questions were asked via the TNS Online Omnibus to 1,009 adults aged 16-64 in Great Britain between 27-31 March 2008.

# Conclusion

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.

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