



# Tackling digital exclusion

Older blind and partially sighted people  
and the internet



supporting blind and  
partially sighted people

Sponsored by



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### **Acknowledgements**

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#### **Older people with sight loss ask:**

Where would I start?

What do I need?

Where do I get support?

How can I stay safe online?

How can I help others?

This report outlines our commitments to tackling digital exclusion of older people with sight loss – work with us to play your part.



# BT Foreword



Today's technology enables us to communicate and access information in ever more powerful ways. Young people today have not experienced life without the internet and more of us are using devices on the move. This opens up all kinds of exciting opportunities for enriching our lives.

However for some people getting online and exploring the internet can be a daunting prospect. Disabled people stand to gain so much yet often there are barriers to access, preventing their participation. There are almost two million people with sight loss in the UK. Many of them would welcome the opportunity to use the internet given the appropriate hardware, software connectivity and training.

BT has been helping people get online since 2002. We are delighted to support RNIB and their research into the barriers that may be preventing blind and partially sighted people from getting online and how these might be broken down. We want everyone to be able to benefit from today's communications technology.

**Liz Williams**

**General Manager, BT Retail Corporate Responsibility**

## RNIB Foreword

We are delighted that BT has supported us with this research, which begins to address the internal and external barriers that get in the way of getting online.



Technology has always been used by blind and partially sighted people to help increase independence. Innovations that we now take for granted, such as the fountain pen, typewriter, LP record and eBook, were all technologies originally invented for blind people. Recent developments such as the internet have the potential to improve the lives of blind and partially sighted people across the world. It is already enabling many people to access information, contact friends and create employment opportunities. In many aspects of modern life those without access to the internet can be disadvantaged, unable to access the best deals to help money go further or get the benefit of new convenient services.

Although not everyone will be interested in using the internet, those who wish to should have the choice to do so. From talking with our members we know that there are significant barriers preventing blind and partially sighted people from using the internet. This research captures the perspective of hundreds of older people with sight loss and provides a range of recommendations for RNIB and other important partners.

**Lesley-Anne Alexander**  
Chief Executive, RNIB

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# Executive summary: research findings and recommendations

## 1. Introduction

Whilst the use of the internet has grown dramatically in recent years, particular groups of people in society are less likely to be online than others (Communications Consumer Panel, 2010; FreshMinds, 2008; Wong et al, 2009). Amongst these groups are older people with sight loss. Recognising that exclusion from the internet can disadvantage people with sight loss, BT supported RNIB to investigate the barriers preventing older people with sight loss from using the internet.

## 2. Study aims

The aims of the study were to:

- identify the barriers and enablers to getting online for older people with sight loss
- identify the types of online activities in which people would like to engage
- provide recommendations that will enable older blind and partially sighted people to get online.

## 3. Methodology

The national study employed a mixed methods approach. This included a telephone survey of 300 blind and partially sighted people aged 65 years and over; seven discussion groups and 70 face-to-face interviews with older blind and partially sighted people across the UK, some of whom were online, in addition to six in-depth telephone interviews with professionals who provide support and training to people with sight loss.

The research findings have been organised around the framework developed by the Communications Consumer Panel (2010) which provides a useful tool for setting out the stages from non use to full online participation for older people with sight loss.

## 4. Results

### 4.1 Getting interested

#### 4.1.1 Perception that sight loss is a barrier

Getting older people with sight loss interested in using the internet will involve changing the wide spread perception that sight loss precludes the use of the internet. Most of the respondents in the survey (82 per cent) reported that their eyesight was a reason why they were not using the internet. Combined with low awareness of assistive technologies, many older people with sight loss do not regard the use of the internet as an activity that is open to them.

#### 4.1.2 Improving understanding of the internet

Getting people online will also involve raising general awareness of the internet. Although few people involved in the study had not heard of the internet at all, well over half of the respondents in the survey (60 per cent) said they were not online because they did not know much about it. However the internet was generally thought to be a positive development.

#### 4.1.3 Appealing to personal interests

Non internet users had difficulty thinking about the types of things they might use the internet for. Internet users in the study, however, described a diverse range of uses such as communicating with family and friends and downloading music and books. Using the internet was also highlighted as providing a means of accessing information independently of others.

#### 4.1.4 Accept that not everyone wants to be online

Around half (51 per cent) of the respondents in the survey said that they were not currently online because they did not want to be. Reluctance towards getting online may to some extent be explained by low levels of awareness about the internet but there was a feeling that the internet could increase isolation. Health problems including memory problems, diabetes and dexterity problems also deterred people from using the internet.

## **4.2 What is needed to get online?**

### **4.2.1 Provision of training to include access technology**

Given that many of the older people encountered in the study did not have the necessary computer skills required to get online, it was clear that the provision of training would have to include basic computer familiarisation as well as touch-typing skills in some cases, in addition to learning how to use access technology. Trainers also noted the importance of individualised training solutions which take into account a person's level of sight.

### **4.2.2 Simplified access technology solutions**

The standard computer interface is daunting for many people and this is even more off-putting when used with a complicated screen reader. A number of internet users who were interviewed as part of the study described using abridged software solutions, which simplified the process of getting online. Others may avoid using a computer all together, opting instead to use an iPad or a mobile phone to go online.

### **4.2.3 Affordable access technology**

Internet users and non internet users commented on the high cost of equipment and the lack of financial assistance that is available. Whilst the set up costs associated with purchasing computers and internet connection are not unique to blind and partially sighted people, the additional costs associated with purchasing access technology solutions, without which many are unable to get online, was noted to be a key barrier. Raising awareness about freely available access solutions software such as NVDA and inbuilt magnification tools in Microsoft applications were discussed but these did not appear to be widely recognised by participants.

## **4.3 Making it work**

### **Ongoing technical support**

The provision of technical support to assist people with getting online both at the point of set up and beyond was evident. Local and national organisations for blind and partially sighted people were often trusted sources of support which could facilitate links with local IT volunteers where available. Whilst trainers encouraged the use of volunteers they cautioned that the quality of volunteer support could be variable.



## 4.4 Enjoying the benefits

### Accessible websites

Although outside the scope of this project, inaccessible websites remain a barrier to enjoying the full benefits of the internet. Along with the set up costs, the inability to access poorly designed sites was frequently mentioned by the internet users who took part in the study.

## 4.5 Managing the risks

### Increasing awareness of risks

Although perceptions of the internet were generally positive, respondents were aware of some of its unsavoury aspects such as internet fraud. Twenty eight per cent of the survey respondents said they were not online because of worries about internet safety. During interviews some respondents were aware of their vulnerability to scams because of not being able to tell what was happening on the screen.

## 5. Conclusion

The report findings indicate that there is no one barrier to getting online for older people with sight loss but a series of obstacles that are likely to be encountered as people move from being non users to internet users. It does highlight some barriers that are specific to older people with sight loss, such as the perception that sight loss itself prevents them from getting online. Addressing the barriers will inevitably involve increasing awareness of the uses and benefits of getting online, ongoing training and support and ensuring that people remain safe while doing so. However barriers external to the individual, such as the high cost of access technology and the provision of training, will also need to be tackled. At the same time it must be recognised that the requirements of older people with sight loss will vary considerably and as such each individual will require tailored solutions to meet those needs.

## 6. Recommendations

### 6.1 RNIB

It is recommended that RNIB adopts the five stages of the Framework for Digital Participation as the basis of a new technology support strategy to reflect the scope of our vision and work.

- **Getting interested:** RNIB's early intervention strategies, which are designed to support people at the early stages of their sight loss journey, should promote the benefits of getting online. Offerings could include a range of opportunities for people who either do not currently use the internet or are only using it in limited areas. Use of the internet as a means of independently getting on with everyday activities should be promoted.
- **Acquiring the solutions:** RNIB should consider its own role as a provider of solutions and how it works with partners to increase the digital inclusion of older people with sight loss.
- **Making it work:** RNIB should consider how to help people find technology training near where they live. There are many large and small organisations working hard to help people to get online. RNIB could offer specialist advice and materials to enable them to confidently support people with sight loss. To help people at home, RNIB could enhance their highly regarded volunteer service. Various options should be explored such as the provision of telephone advice sessions and remotely taking over computers in order to fix issues or show someone how to do something.
- **Enjoying the benefits:** This stage considers getting the most out of technology, becoming more confident and skilled and beginning to support others. Peer support opportunities may be provided through Insight Radio shows, podcasts, RNIB's Talk and Support groups, local groups and magazine pages. RNIB should also continue to campaign for all accessible websites to adhere to See It Right or other accessibility standards.
- **Staying safe:** This stage considers what is needed to enable older people with sight loss to identify and avoid risks that can be encountered online. This can be achieved by including information on how to stay safe in future activities and by promoting existing resources such as [getsafeonline.org](http://getsafeonline.org).

## 6.2 Government

- There needs to be more focus on the needs of disabled people who are digitally excluded. The Department for Culture, Media and Sport's eAccessibility plan has many elements that address barriers identified in this report and this initiative deserves a higher priority in the government agenda. Addressing digital exclusion is critical to both the economy and social justice. RNIB urges policy makers across the UK to act on the findings of this report.
- Financial assistance to help older people with sight loss develop their online capabilities is required, for example, through meeting the costs of equipment and assistive technologies for those on low incomes.
- Recognising that, for a variety of reasons, many older people with sight loss will remain offline and will be further disadvantaged by the removal of traditional means of accessing goods and services, the government should work with voluntary sector partners to advise people where non-technological options exist.

## 6.3 Older people with sight loss and their families

Older people with sight loss and their families are encouraged to be inquisitive about how accessible technology can enable individuals to get online, and to ask for information and support. A growing body of digitally confident beneficiaries creates a population that can help other people, because we know that some people enjoy sharing their newly acquired skills with others who are just starting out.

## 6.4 Service providers

Many of our respondents referred to problems using websites that were not accessible. Companies that understand the needs of their customers ensure that their internet services are accessible to people who need additional tools to use the web. They will follow the technical guidance that is widely available, and seek feedback from disabled users. It isn't only good business sense not to disadvantage disabled customers, but a requirement of the Equality Act.

## 6.5 Training providers

Greater awareness amongst mainstream providers of IT training and support about how best to assist older people with sight loss with getting online is required as is the improved understanding of the access technology solutions used by blind and partially sighted people to get online is also needed.

# 1. Introduction

The range of activities carried out online by the general public has grown dramatically in recent years. However, use of the internet is not evenly distributed and some members of society are less likely to be online than others (Communications Consumer Panel, 2010; FreshMinds, 2008; Wong et al, 2009). Amongst these groups are older people, people on low incomes and people with disabilities. There is a considerable degree of overlap across these groups (Wong et al, 2009). Of the 1.8 million older people in the UK with sight loss, most are over 65 years old (Access Economics, 2009). This study is focused on the needs of these people. A short review of the literature is provided in Appendix A.

Recognising that the internet is increasingly becoming an integral part of life and that exclusion from it as a resource may further disadvantage people with sight loss, BT supported RNIB to undertake a study to identify some of the unique barriers preventing older people with sight loss from getting online. In addition, understanding the factors that enable individuals to get online will aid the development of strategies to assist those who are not. RNIB is keen to apply this learning to its own digital inclusion work.

The themes arising from the research have been organised around the Framework for Digital Participation developed by the Communications Consumer Panel (2010) which sets out the five stages of the journey from non digital participation to participation.

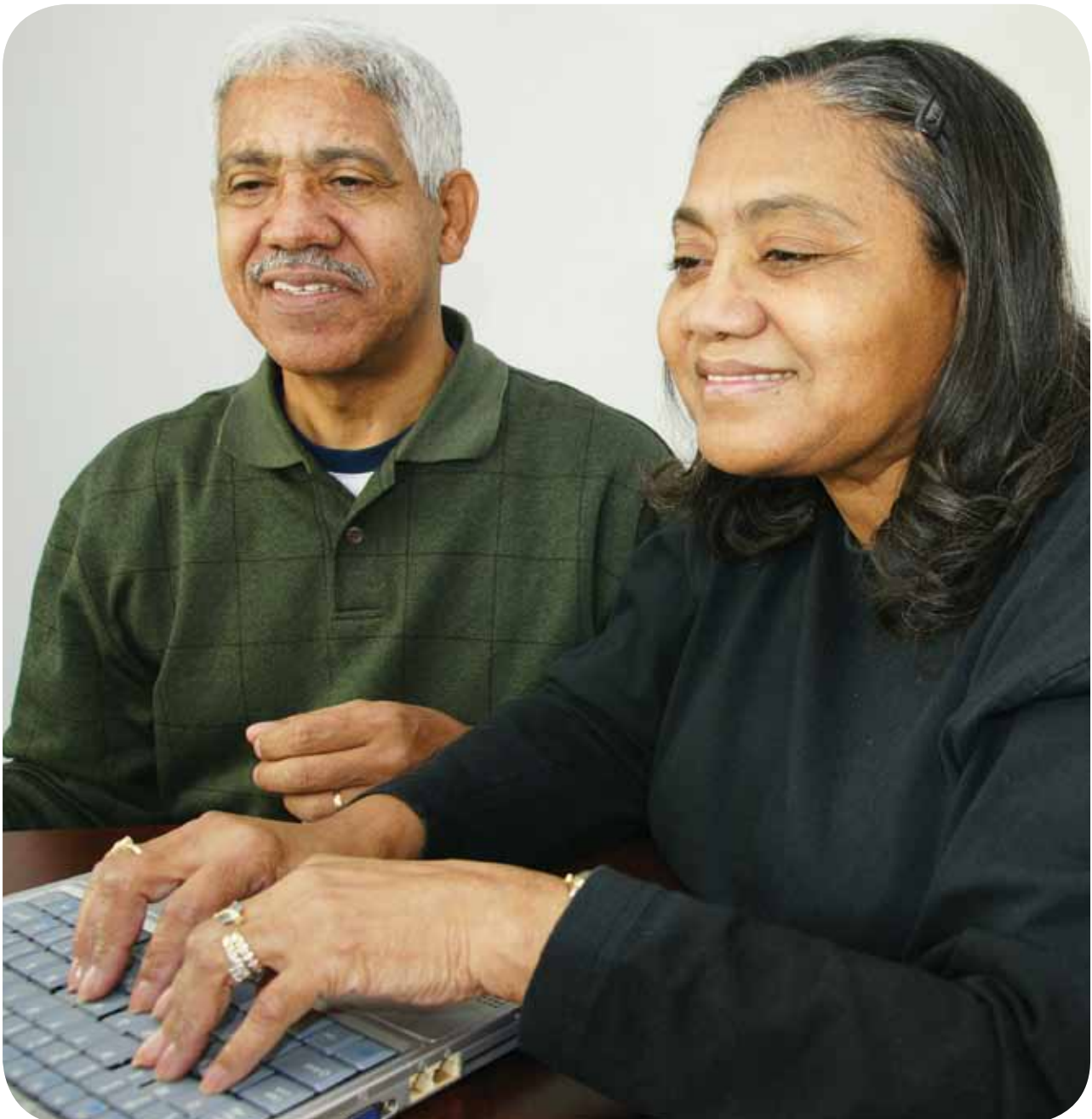
These are:

- Getting interested
- Getting online
- Making it work
- Enjoying the benefits
- Managing the risks.

## 2. Study aims

Given the importance of enabling as many people who want to get online to do so, and the limited availability of research focussed on older people with sight loss, the current study aims to:

- identify the barriers and enablers to getting online for older blind and partially sighted people
- identify the types of online activities in which people would like to engage
- provide recommendations that will enable older blind and partially sighted people to get online.



### 3. Methodology

This study used a mixed methods approach combining both quantitative and qualitative techniques (Johnson and Onwuegbuzie, 2004).

A telephone survey of 150 blind and 150 partially sighted people over the age of 65 years who were non internet users was undertaken. Respondents were asked about their main reasons for not being online and their propensity to engage in the future.

A random sample was drawn from RNIB's contacts database of around 280,000 people. Interviews took place during October 2011 and were conducted by a social firm called Viewpoint which employs researchers who themselves are blind or partially sighted. The results of the survey data are provided in Appendix B.

To obtain individual accounts and perceptions of the internet, seven discussion groups and 70 face-to-face interviews with older blind and partially sighted people were held across the UK. In order to identify the factors that enable older people with sight loss to get online the in-depth interviews also included individuals who were online.

In-depth telephone interviews with six professionals who provide IT support and training to people with sight loss were conducted to obtain their views on the barriers encountered and any solutions identified.



## 4. Findings

### 4.1 Getting interested

#### 4.1.1 Shifting the perception that sight loss itself is a barrier

The psychological barrier that sight loss precludes the use of the internet was a prominent one. The majority of respondents in the survey (82 per cent) reported that their eyesight was a reason why they were not using the internet. Similarly, during interviews and discussion groups, responses to the question posed by the researcher about reasons for not being online were often met with surprise and in some cases incredulity:

“Well it’s obvious, I can’t see the screen to use it. I’m blind.”

Sight loss as an explanation for not using the internet was often added to the list of other familiar reasons:

“I’m too old, it’s too fiddly and I can’t see. And I’d rather keep in touch with people over the phone. And I don’t see what advantage it would give me.”

“My eye sight and at my age I don’t think the brain works well enough to absorb new information like this.”

It was common for people to regard other people with sight loss, whom they knew were using the internet as exceptional rather than the norm.

“He’s different, he lives on his own, and he’s very clever.”

“I think youth has to be on your side if you want to use it, however we do have friends in their 70s who use it.”

Some respondents who were previously computer and internet users reported selling or giving away their computer equipment in the belief that they could no longer be used once their sight had deteriorated. This illustrates the importance of getting information to individuals early on in their sight loss journey.

“I used to have a computer before my eyesight started to fail but I got rid of it.”

“It was very convenient when I used to use it before I lost my sight.”

Awareness of assistive technologies that can enable blind and partially sighted people to get online was also found to be low amongst older people with sight loss. This is supported by the fact that just 32 per cent reported that a reason they were not online was because they did not have the accessibility equipment required.

### 4.1.2 Improving understanding of the internet

Although few people involved in the study hadn't heard of the internet at all, over half (60 per cent) of the respondents in the survey said they were not online because they did not know much about it. Low awareness was found to be a major barrier since the limited information people had prevented them from deciding whether the internet was something they could utilise.

"Don't know much about it so can't comment.... "

The lack of familiarity with the terminology used when in the presence of internet users left some people feeling bewildered, particularly amongst the older respondents in the group discussions. It was clear that future training would involve starting with the basics:

"It's like they're talking another language. It goes right over my head."

Despite the low level of awareness, older people with sight loss held generally positive views about the internet:

"From what I have heard from the family it sounds wonderful".

During the discussion groups and interviews, non-internet users were encountered who reported enjoying some of the benefits of the internet because friends and family would go online on their behalf. In the survey, 39 per cent of the survey respondents said that they were not online because friends and family went online on their behalf. Although the minority of respondents were aware of the ways in which the internet could help make living with limited or no sight easier, those who were using the internet remarked on the independence it gave them such as the ability to organise holidays, buy train tickets and access services that related to sight loss without having to rely on others:

"I use the accessible train timetable. It's very good."

"It's very good. I don't have to wait for assistance when I want to buy things. Very often the people in the shops don't know what I'm talking about but I can do my research online and buy what I want."



Often when people expressed an interest in getting online they were unsure of where to go for information.

“I would like to [use the internet]. Does RNIB provide training – could they help?”

### **4.1.3 Appealing to personal interests**

Non users were asked what they would use the internet for, if all the obstacles to getting online were removed. Respondents often found this difficult to answer due to low levels of information about potential uses of the internet and importantly how these might relate to them. Those who had a view described a diverse range of potential uses:

“To get in touch with my grandson in Australia.”

“I didn’t accept it at the beginning but now I realise its very effective... I would use it to write stories and find publishers. I write stories you see. I might also keep in touch with my son – he has a government job and works out of the country.”

“I use it to order books for my kindle, look for information. I like reading and finding out about things from RNIB.”

### **4.1.4 Accept that not everyone wants to be online**

For some individuals there may be no way to motivate them to use the internet. Around half (51 per cent) of the respondents in the survey said that they were currently not online because they did not want to be. Research elsewhere suggests that often resistance is as a result of limited information about how the internet could feature in their lives. Comments from respondents to this study included:

“I resent being told that I have to get the internet. Some of us don’t want to.”

“I’ve managed so long without it I just don’t want or need it.”

“I don’t want it, neither does my husband. A lot of shops are going out of business because of it!”

“I have friends who are sitting in front of computers all day who tell me what problems they have.”

“Not bothered, wife does it all that’s it.”

Common amongst these “flat refusers” was the sentiment that the internet increases isolation rather than reduces it – a point discussed by the Gulbenkian Foundation (2010). It was clear that face-to-face contact and leaving the home to interact socially with other people were in themselves valued activities. This may be more pronounced for people with sight loss. However, increasing awareness that using the internet is not an “either/ or” situation may help with getting people interested:

“I could probably learn if I put my mind to it and I’m not against technology but I don’t want to be sat in front of a screen. I’d rather do things out of the house while I’m still able to. It’s very difficult for young people to comprehend.”

For others, additional health problems including memory problems, diabetes and dexterity problems were reported to be reasons that deterred people from using the internet.

“I have other health issues and don’t want to.”

“...we have problems with our hands and manipulating the keyboard.”

## 4.2 What is needed to get online

### 4.2.1 Provision of training to include access technology

As with older people more generally, many older people with sight loss encountered in the study lacked the necessary computer skills required to get online. Individuals who were online tended to have been blind or had low vision from birth or at an early age and as such are likely to have received tuition in touch-typing skills and computer training as part of their education or rehabilitation. For others, familiarity with computers was acquired while sighted. Computers were often used as part of their jobs before the onset of sight loss. However, the experience of many in the study was that their sight had deteriorated during older age and they had never used computers when they were sighted. Often people spoke with regret about not having gained computer skills when the opportunity had presented itself when they were younger or before the deterioration of their eye sight. It was clear that computer training for this group of people is likely to start at a basic level:

“I think if I’d never used it before my sight went I’d need some good personal tuition. It’s hopeless giving people a manual and telling them to get on with it”.

This respondent's experience was also echoed by an IT trainer:

"A lot of people get very disappointed because they think they can get straight on to the internet. What they don't realise is before that you need basic computer skills."

A non internet user suggested that training designed to assist older people with sight loss to get online would need to recognise that some people may need to receive the same information several times:

"One off training isn't sufficient. You have to remember that if you're older you are a bit slower. Training has to be repetitive."

Another trainer noted that not only will training older people with sight loss involve teaching computer skills but probably also touch-typing skills and learning how to use access technology.

"A lot of it is building confidence and enabling people to learn that you don't have to rely on eyesight."

The need to establish the best solution for each individual, taking into account individual eye conditions and their degree of sight loss was noted. Some respondents discussed the ways in which their eye condition affected their ability to use computer screens. One respondent explained that although she was currently able to use her computer with the aid of screen magnification to send emails to friends, her rapidly deteriorating sight was likely to force her into giving it up. For another person, looking at the screen resulted in severe headaches so a method of access that did not involve looking at the screen may have benefited her:

"I'm physically of incapable of looking at the screen. I develop severe headaches."

Retraining people to use alternative ways of getting online will also be required. If people with deteriorating sight are to stay online they will need to be retrained to use alternative methods, such as different access technology equipment.

## 4.2.2 Simplified access technology solutions

Given that so many people in the study had no previous experience of using computers, simplified methods for getting online are required. A number of internet users who were interviewed as part of the study described using abridged software solutions which simplified the process of accessing internet services. One such tool frequently mentioned was Dolphin Guide. One trainer described how Dolphin Guide software overcomes the difficulties faced by access technology users when encountering images on websites:

“It strips out images and leaves only the text. People will still need keyboard training. It is limited and only has a few functions.”

Respondents who were using it discussed its simplicity:

‘It’s really easy; you press F1 for emails, F2 for the internet, another for the radio.’

“It’s made me think how unnecessarily complicated emails are.”

As noted by the trainer above, the range of functions available on software such as Dolphin Guide is limited and individuals wanting to access a wider range of internet services were using other solutions such as JAWS for speech and Zoom text for magnification.

“NVDA is a free screen reader and Windows 7 has screen magnification although it’s not quite as good as SupaNova.” IT Trainer

Freely available access software solutions such as NVDA and inbuilt magnification tools in Microsoft applications were discussed but these did not appear to be widely recognised by participants.

## 4.2.3 Affordable access technology

The cost associated with access technology solutions was given by 25 per cent of non internet users as the reason why they are not online. This figure is low compared to the more frequent references in discussion groups and interviews with internet users and non internet users aware of the cost implications of access technology, and it probably reflects the general low awareness of the internet and access technology solutions amongst this non-user group.

“It’s about £600 to buy SupaNova, then you have to get the anti-virus software and they all need upgrading.”

“I’m thinking of getting a computer but I can’t afford the software. All the grants that were around before are gone.”

“It’s an awful lot of money, especially for pensioners.”

There was a feeling amongst some that companies producing access technology solutions lacked competition and in effect had a captive audience. The government funded scheme Access to Work was often mentioned as the means through which some individuals had obtained the equipment and training required to get online. Both internet users and non internet users commented that there appeared to be no similar scheme for people who were not in employment:

“Cost is an issue. Computers are getting cheaper all the time but the cost of the software is incredible. If you don’t access it through Access to Work, if you’re a private citizen, it’s not at all affordable.”

“The cost of [name of access software] is silly! I got mine through Access to Work but I don’t know what I would have done if that wasn’t available.”

During the course of the fieldwork it was evident that there was considerable “buzz” surrounding the inbuilt accessibility of some tablet PCs and smart mobile phones. Although a few individuals taking part in discussion groups were utilising the inbuilt accessibility features of some of these newer technologies the purchase costs were felt to be prohibitive for most.

Whilst the set up costs associated with purchasing computers and internet connection are not unique to blind and partially sighted people, the additional costs associated with purchasing access technology solutions, without which many are unable to get online remains a key barrier. Other barriers related to this stage of the journey from non participation to participation were space in the home to house IT equipment, such as bulky scanners, and transportation to training sessions, when it was conducted outside of the home setting, for those with mobility difficulties.

## 4.3 Making it work

### 4.3.1 Ongoing technical support

The provision of technical support to assist people with getting online both at the point of set up and beyond was evident:

“The initial set up is not simple. It’s very difficult knowing what one to get”.

One blind 76 year old respondent discussed her frustration at not being able to use the equipment she had bought some months earlier. This illustrates the need for ongoing support to prevent disillusionment amongst would-be users:

“I bought a laptop in March and I’ve got Guide. I thought I could get on to the internet straight away. But I just can’t get on with it. It’s just so frustrating. I don’t know what to do or where to go.”

“When it goes wrong you can’t see what’s going on and there’s no sound.”

Respondents who were online reported accessing various forms of support when assistance was required. Local and national organisations for blind and partially sighted people were often trusted sources of support and would facilitate links with local volunteers, where available. Whilst trainers encouraged the use of volunteers, recognising this would result in assisting a greater number of people, they cautioned that the quality of volunteer support could be variable.

“Not everyone will make a good trainer even if they’ve worked with computers before. You have to be good at conveying information and that’s especially important working with the group we are working with.”

A few respondents were paying for private IT support to assist with troubleshooting in their homes. However, one respondent felt that the trainer she received was not sufficiently aware of the access technology she was using.

One local society, visited as part of the study, ran a weekly computer group that was accessed predominantly by older people. Members discussed the wider benefits of being part of the group: not only could they meet other people with sight loss to share information, knowledge and ideas about information technology, they were also able to learn more about the services that would assist in other areas of their lives.

In a few cases local libraries were mentioned as a source of IT support, although as the quote below illustrates, support could rely on just one member of staff:

“The local library does have a person who will go over things with clients.”

In more than one instance the local library had closed.

There were several cases where blind and partially sighted people were teaching other people with sight loss to use the internet:

“I’ve been helping two people to learn... teaching them how to use the computer. Part of teaching is making mistakes and learning how to correct them.”

Getting to venues that provided support was problematic for some people, particularly for people residing in rural areas where the venue could be miles from their home.

## 4.4 Enjoying the benefits

### 4.4.1 Accessible websites

Although outside the scope of the project, inaccessible websites remain a barrier to enjoying the full benefits of the internet. Along with the set up costs, the inability to access poorly designed sites was frequently mentioned by the internet users who took part in the study.

## 4.5. Managing the risks

### 4.5.1 Increasing awareness of risks

Although perceptions of the internet were generally positive, respondents were aware of some of the unsavoury aspects such as internet fraud. Twenty eight per cent of the survey respondents said they were not online because of worries about internet safety. During interviews respondents were aware of their vulnerability to scams because of not being able to tell what was happening on the screen. The study also included people who had experienced first hand internet scams:

“I was diddled out of money on the internet once and that has put me off.”

There is a need to provide up-to-date information to assist people to avoid the risks associated with internet crime.

## 5. Conclusions and recommendations

The Communications Consumer Panel framework provides a useful tool for setting out the stages from non use to full participation for older people with sight loss.

### 5.1 Breaking the barriers

The report findings indicate that there is no one barrier to getting online but a series of obstacles that are likely to be encountered as people move from being non users to internet users. It does highlight some barriers that are specific to older people with sight loss, such as the perception that sight loss itself prevents them from getting online. This reasoning was invariably compounded by other barriers identified elsewhere in this report, which reinforced their perception that they sit outside developments in technology.

As a starting point, this perception will need to be transformed in order to move individuals closer to becoming confident users of the internet. At the same time it must be recognised that the requirements of older people with sight loss will vary considerably and as such each individual will require tailored solutions to meet their needs.

It is encouraging that the internet is generally viewed positively by older people with sight loss and that some were accessing the benefits, albeit through other people. However the negative perceptions held by some older people cannot be ignored and these should be addressed by future interventions. These are more likely to be successful if they take a holistic approach by seeking to remove potential barriers at each stage of the journey to participation. This should prevent enthusiastic and would-be internet users from switching off before they have started.

### 5.2 Increasing information

Low awareness of the internet among respondents resulted in difficulties understanding how the internet might improve their lives generally and more specifically with regards to living with sight loss. Informing people about the benefits that can be gained and relating this to individual interests which were diverse and varied, may increase interest.



## 5.3 Familiarisation

As part of efforts to increase awareness, demonstrations on how access technology can be used to get online through taster sessions and direct contact with hardware can illustrate the potential uses of the internet to older people. Such events may usefully be held in the venues where older people currently meet, though internet services may not always be available. Transport for individuals for whom mobility might be an issue will need to be considered.

## 5.4 Getting started

Converting older people with sight loss from individuals who are motivated to learn about the internet into established, long term users will require assistance with obtaining affordable IT solutions that are appropriate to their individual needs. People will also require help with installation and set up.

## 5.5 Remaining online

Ongoing training and support for when things go wrong or simply to advance basic skills will be required to keep individuals motivated to use the internet on a regular basis. Volunteer support was noted as a useful resource especially if efforts to motivate individuals are successful. However, variations in the quality and the ad hoc nature of volunteer support should be addressed.

The aim of the study was not to focus on accessible websites but it is clear that this continues to be a barrier to full participation.

Finally every effort must be made to reduce the risk to older blind and partially sighted internet users of online crime by informing people of these risks and how to avoid them.

## 5.6 Recommendations

### 5.6.1 RNIB

It is recommended that RNIB adopts the five stages of the Framework for Digital Participation as the basis of a new technology support strategy to reflect the scope of our vision and work.

### Getting interested

This stage addresses questions such as “Is this for me?”, “Why should I bother?” and “Where would I start?”.

**RNIB’s early intervention strategies, which are designed to support people at the early stages of their sight loss journey, should promote the benefits of getting online.**

It is recommended that RNIB should consider offering a range of opportunities for people who either don’t currently use the internet, or are only using it in limited areas. RNIB should promote ways of independently getting on with every day activities. For example, events might be themed around: “making more of your money”, “shopping online”, “carry on reading”, “meet your personal assistant, your mobile phone”, “getting online for less”, “staying in touch”. This would involve working in partnership with local and national organisations to develop and implement a national programme of workshops aimed at familiarising older people with sight loss with the internet.

### Acquiring the solutions

This stage moves to a decision about which of the options to take up and making a purchase.

**RNIB should consider its own role as a provider of solutions and work with mainstream partners to deliver digital inclusion to older people with sight loss.**

As many people will choose specialist solutions tailored to their particular needs RNIB should consider its role in providing pre-sales advice, the opportunity to try things out and support for set up in the home. RNIB should also be mindful of the increasing demand for mainstream products and consider partnerships that will enable us to offer or signpost to affordable or low cost access technology solutions.

## **Making it work**

This stage considers how people get started with their technology products, through set up, support and training.

**RNIB should explore new ways to offer support and work with other organisations to ensure bite sized training at affordable rates is available and accessible.**

RNIB should consider how to help people find technology training near where they live. There are many large and small organisations working hard to help people to get online. RNIB could offer specialist advice and materials to enable them to confidently support people with sight loss. To help people at home, RNIB could enhance their highly regarded volunteer service. Various options should be explored such as the provision of telephone advice sessions and remotely taking over computers in order to fix issues or show someone how to do something.

## **Enjoying the benefits**

This stage considers getting the most out of technology, becoming more confident and skilled and beginning to support others.

**RNIB should consider how to provide opportunities for people with sight loss to share knowledge and support each other.**

These peer support opportunities might be through Insight Radio shows, podcasts, Talk and Support groups, local groups and magazine pages. RNIB should also continue to campaign for all accessible websites to adhere to See It Right or other accessibility standards.

## **Staying safe**

This stage considers what is needed to enable older people with sight loss to identify and avoid risks that can be encountered online.

This can be achieved by including information on how to stay safe in future activities and by promoting existing resources such as [getsafeonline.org](https://www.getsafeonline.org).

## 5.6.2 Government

There needs to be more focus on the needs of disabled people who are digitally excluded: this is a key message of this report. Much has been achieved through initiatives such as Race Online, but there remains much to be done. The Department for Culture, Media and Sport's eAccessibility plan has many elements that address barriers identified in this report and this initiative deserves a higher priority in the government agenda. Addressing digital exclusion is critical to both the economy and social justice. RNIB urges policy makers in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland to act on the findings of this report.

The government should provide financial assistance to help older people with sight loss develop their online capabilities, for example through meeting the costs of equipment and assistive technologies for those on low incomes.

Government needs to recognise that for a variety of reasons many older people with sight loss will remain offline and will be further disadvantaged by the removal of traditional means of accessing goods and services.

The government should work with voluntary sector partners to advise people where non-technological options exist.

## 5.6.3 Older people with sight loss and their families

Older people with sight loss are encouraged to be inquisitive about how accessible technology can enable individuals to get online, and ask for information and support. A growing body of digitally confident beneficiaries creates a population that can help other people with sight loss, because we know that some people enjoy sharing their newly acquired skills with others who are just starting out.

## 5.6.4 Service providers

Many of our respondents referred to problems using websites that were not accessible. Companies that understand the needs of their customers ensure that their internet services are accessible to people who need additional tools to use the web. They will follow the technical guidance that is widely available, and seek feedback from disabled users. It isn't only good business sense not to disadvantage disabled customers, but a requirement of the Equality Act.

## 5.6.5 Training providers

Greater awareness amongst mainstream providers of IT training and support about how best to assist older people with sight loss with getting online is required, as is an improved understanding of the access technology solutions used by blind and partially sighted people to get online.

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# Appendix A: literature review

## 1.1 The internet explosion

Rapid technological advances have meant that the internet has radically changed the way in which we go about our everyday lives and is increasingly becoming an important part of social life. In 2011 the internet served over 19 million (77 per cent) households in the UK and 82 per cent of adults reported having used the internet at least once (ONS, 2011). In the same year 32 million people purchased goods online and 55 per cent of adults used internet banking services (ONS, 2011). With many retailers only offering discounts to online customers, it has been estimated that savings of up to £560 per year can be made through shopping online (Race Online, 2011). The vast opportunities for education, employment and lifelong learning has also been noted (Counihan, 2009) in addition to studies comparing the quality of life of internet and non internet users (Fresh Minds, 2009) which found that the former had higher levels of overall happiness, self confidence and quality of life.

## 1.2 The digital divide

Given the considerable benefits of the internet, individuals who face disadvantage in other areas of life, are also most likely to have never used the internet (Wong et al, 2009). For as long as there has been discussion about 'digital' there has been discussion about the 'divide', referring to the inequality of access to the internet between those who are online and individuals who for a range of reasons are not. Of the 17 per cent (8.2 million) of the UK adult population who have never used the internet, the majority are over the age of 65 years (ONS, 2011). People with disabilities also represent over half of those who never used the internet (ONS, 2011). In short, those not online tend to be older, have reported disabilities, have less formal qualifications, less income and live in rural or remote areas (as a result of market driven broadband availability).

Inequality of access to the internet has prompted many to regard digital exclusion as a new form of social exclusion (Wong et al, 2009; Hannon and Bradwell, 2007). The interrelated nature of digital exclusion and social exclusion means that a lack of access to online resources will have an impact on other areas of social life. Getting more people online therefore is seen as a means of tackling other forms of exclusion, for example social isolation (Independent Age, 2010; Wong et al, 2009).

## 1.3 Older people and the internet

A rapidly aging population means that there are now more over 65 year olds in the UK than there are under 16s. Older people (defined as 65 years and older for the purposes of this study) are far from being a homogeneous group. As noted by the Caluste Gulbenkian Foundation:

“..there is a great difference between a 65 year old who is still in work and actively engaged in learning about technological developments and a person over 80 who never used a computer during their working life and may regard themselves as too old to start now (2010, page 10).”

The drive to increase online participation amongst older people has resulted in a considerable body of research that is focused on understanding the various barriers older people might encounter (Age Concern, 2009; Hannon and Bradwell, 2007). The key findings have been summarised below.

### Understanding about the internet

A lack of familiarity and understanding about the internet and low confidence have been identified as key barriers to getting online for older people (Age Concern, 2009). These in turn can lead to fear, a major barrier amongst over 55s in research conducted by UK online centres (2011). Fear may also cause some people influenced by negative media coverage of fraud and online bullying to be dismissive of the internet (Age Concern, 2009) or to hold the belief that they are too old and that the internet is just for young people (FreshMinds, UK Online Centres, 2011).

Age Concern however, found that their respondents were aware of the benefits of the internet and would ask family and friends to access these on their behalf as well as recognising the increasing importance of the internet. However, this use of the internet by proxy can reinforce an older person's offline status.

### Particular personality types are more receptive

Some studies have investigated the link between psychological traits and take up of the internet and have found that particular personality types will embrace the internet more readily than others – mainly those least risk averse and less prone to nostalgia (Hannon and Bradwell, 2007; Reisenwitz et al, 2007; Sudbury and Simcock, 2009). Whilst this finding is not unique to age Hannon and Bradwell (2007), in their study for Demos, identified four typologies associated with older people's attitudes to getting online and suggest that there is a link with age.



## **Start up costs**

The cost associated with getting online, such as the purchase of hardware, was a barrier for some older people although authors of the Age Concern (2009) report noted that these concerns tended to be outweighed by other issues.

## **Motivations for take up of the internet for older people**

Research suggests that getting older people motivated to get online should involve appealing to individual interests which will demonstrate the role the internet could play in pursuing these interests (Age Concern, 2009).

Those online were using the internet for a wide range of purposes, such as finding information, sending and receiving emails, buying and selling entertainment, staying in touch, as well as hobbies and interests. Five key trigger points for take up of the internet by older people were identified as (1) being introduced to the internet whilst still in the workforce (2) at the point of retirement (3) at the onset of an health or mobility issue (4) moving far away and (5) the loss of a partner (Age Concern, 2009).

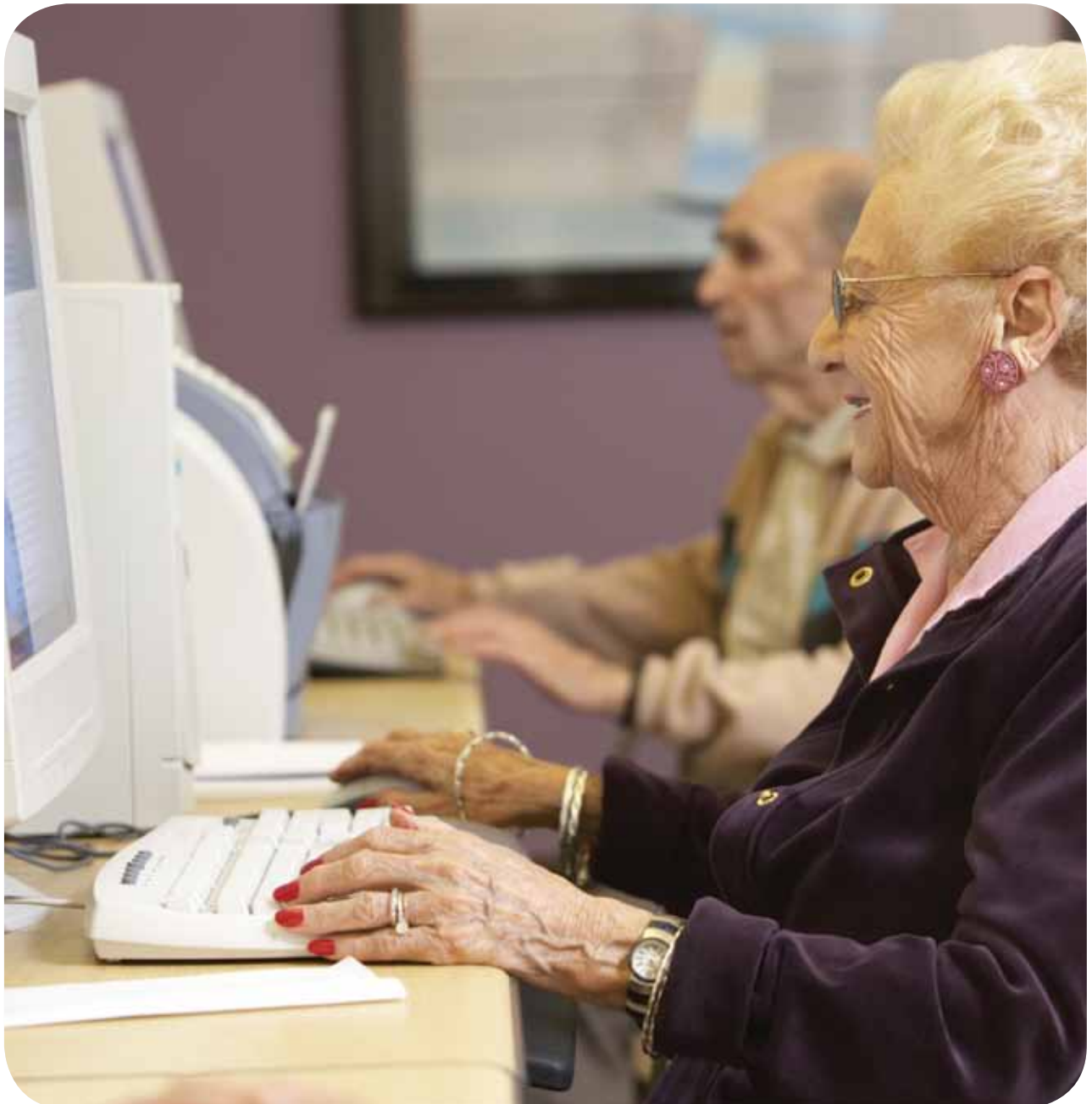
## **1.4 Sight loss, older people and the internet**

Sight loss affects 1.8 million people in the UK and the vast majority are over 65 years old (Access Economics, 2009). The incidence of sight loss is projected to rise by approximately 35 per cent by 2020, largely as a result of the growth of the older population (Department of Health, 2004).

Whilst there have been a number of research studies that have investigated the experiences of disabled people and the internet (Pilling and Floyd, 2004) few have focused specifically on the issues faced by people with sight loss. The most notable study addressing internet use by people with sight loss was commissioned by Ofcom in 2008. This qualitative study investigated how people with sight loss use communication services including television, radio, fixed-line and mobile phones, computers, as well as the internet. It found that although awareness of assistive technologies was high the cost of this equipment was found to be prohibitive for many and unless a person was in employment or in education there were few opportunities to try out new software.

## 1.5 Government initiatives

In 2000 the Labour Government pledged that everyone should have universal internet access by 2005 and that "...all government services will be available online by the same date." (Tony Blair, 2000). Since then a number of initiatives have been designed to get the most excluded people online including Race Online 2012. Berry (2010) notes that initiatives tend to adopt three main strategies for getting people online: (1) improving infrastructure, such as faster broadband speeds, (2) reducing costs and (3) improving skills. However Berry argues that the limited success of some initiatives is a result of their failure to take account of all factors that may prevent people from getting online.



# Appendix B: survey design and results

## 1. Survey design

### 1.1 Sampling frame

A sample was drawn from RNIB's Customer Information System (CIS) which includes the details of over 280,000 contacts who had used RNIB's core services. Only respondents who had agreed to be contacted for research purposes were selected for the survey.

### 1.2 Questionnaire

The survey questionnaire was designed to elicit information on the perceived barriers to internet use for older people with sight loss. The questionnaire was piloted and changes made. The resulting questionnaire is provided in Appendix C.

### 1.3 Fieldwork

The survey interviews took place during October 2011 and were conducted by data collection organisation Viewpoint Research, a social firm which employs researchers who themselves are blind or partially sighted.

### 1.4 Analysis

Analysis was conducted using the statistical software package SPSS and the responses to the open ended questions were coded and grouped into themes.

## 2. Results

### 2.1 Demography of survey respondents

#### 2.1.1 Gender

Forty one per cent of the respondents were male and fifty nine per cent female.

**Table 1. Gender of respondents**

Gender	Frequency	Per cent
Male	123	41
Female	177	59
<b>Total</b>	<b>300</b>	<b>100</b>

#### 2.1.2 Age

Table 2 shows that the survey included respondents from a wide range of age groups and included two respondents who were aged between 100 and 109 years.

A further 22 per cent were aged between 90 and 99 years. However, almost half of the respondents in the survey (49 per cent) were aged between 80 and 89 years.

Twenty eight per cent of respondents were aged between 65 and 79 years.

**Table 2. Age profile of survey respondents**

Age group	Number	Per cent
65-69	19	6
70-79	66	22
80-89	148	49
90-99	65	22
100-109	2	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>300</b>	<b>100</b>

### 2.1.3 Level of sight

Forty five per cent of the respondents in the survey described themselves as blind compared to 55 per cent who reported being partially sighted.

### 2.1.4 Length of time with sight loss

13 per cent of the respondents in the survey reported having experienced sight loss for 12 months or less. A similar proportion (14 per cent) had lost their sight more than 12 months prior to being interviewed but less than three years. 30 per cent reported having had sight loss for over three years but less than 10 years, and 43 per cent who had sight loss for over 10 years. A small proportion (1 per cent) could not remember the time lapsed.

**Table 3. Length of time with sight loss**

Length of time	Frequency	Per cent
12 months or less	38	13
Over 1 years but less than 3 years	41	14
Over 3 years but less than 10 years	89	30
More than 10 years	130	43
Cannot remember	2	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>300</b>	<b>100</b>

### 2.1.5 Previous use of the internet

Most respondents (87 per cent) reported never having used the internet. Of the 40 respondents who had, 24 said they had only used it once in the past six months or less frequently. These respondents were therefore considered to be irregular users and were included in the study.

**Table 4. Which of the following best describes your level of internet use?**

Frequency	Number	Per cent
At least once a day	4	10
Once a week	5	13
Once a month	3	8
Within the last 3 months	4	10
Within the last 6 months or less frequently	24	60
<b>Total</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>100</b>

Of the 16 respondents who reported using the internet within the past three months or more frequently, all reported that they were only able to access the internet with the help of other people when prompted. Since the survey was interested in understanding the factors that prevent older people with sight loss from using the internet independently, all 16 were included in the study.

## 2.1.6 Reasons for not using the internet

Having established that all of the respondents in the survey, even those who had used the internet in the past, were not regular users and not using it independently, respondents were asked what stopped them from using the internet.

**Table 5: What has stopped you from using the internet in the past (without assistance)?** (Multiple response question)

Reason given	Number of respondents stating reason	Per cent of respondents stating reason
My eye sight	246	83
Don't know much about it	180	60
I'm too old	168	56
Too difficult	154	52
Don't want to	154	52
Family/ friend does it for me	118	40
Don't know how to/don't have the skills	100	34
Don't have the accessibility software/ technology required	96	32
Worried about internet safety	85	29
Too expensive/cost	47	16
I'd break it [computer/equipment]	12	4

### 2.1.7 Current propensity to using the internet

Respondents were asked whether they would use the internet if there were no obstacles. 47 per cent said they would use the internet if there were no obstacles compared to 53 per cent who still would not use it.

**Table 6: Imagine if there were no obstacles to using the internet (without assistance), would you use it?**

Yes/No	Number	Per cent
Yes	140	47
No	160	53
<b>Total</b>	<b>300</b>	<b>100</b>

### 2.1.8 Potential uses of the internet

Among the respondents who would use the internet if there were no obstacles, obtaining information (33 per cent), sending and receiving emails (30 per cent) and social networking (21 per cent) were the most commonly reported online activities.

**Table 7: 'If yes, what would you use it for?'**

Types	Number	Per cent
Information	120	33
Email	107	30
Social networking	76	21
News and weather	37	10
Pay bills	19	5
Shopping	2	1
Media	2	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>363</b>	<b>100*</b>

\* Rounded to 100 per cent



**Other uses of the internet:**

“Selling my unwanted things.”

“To get in touch with my grandson in Australia.”

“Family tree.”

“Route finding and holidays.”

“Would use it for reference (as when sighted I used to use reference books).”

“Everything that I could possibly do with it.”

**Reasons given by those who would not use the internet were:**

“I don’t think I would bother as I have family that would do it for me if I really needed them to.”

“I don’t think my brain works sufficiently to go about it.”

“I’m too old to start learning it.”

“Modern technology has passed me by.”



## Appendix C: survey questionnaire

### Introduction

Hello my name is ..... and I'm calling on behalf of RNIB to conduct some research that aims to understand whether blind and partially sighted people of retirement age are using the internet.

Would you mind if I ask you a few questions? It should take about five minutes and your answers will be completely confidential. Are you ok to talk now? (If not please ask when would be a good time to call back).

### Section A: level of internet use

The following questions are to find out about your current level of internet usage.

**Q1. Which ONE of these best describes your level of sight?**

- Blind
- Partially sighted
- No visual impairment (If selected, respondent is not eligible so end questionnaire saying we are only looking to speak to people who are blind or partially sighted)

**Q2. Have you ever used the internet before? This includes using email, World Wide Web, sending instant messages, video messaging.**

- Yes (go to Q3)
- No (respondent is eligible to complete survey. Go straight to Q5)

**Q3. Which of the following best describes your level of internet usage?**

- Several times a day
- Once a day
- Several times a week
- Once a week
- Once a month
- Within the last three months
- Within the last six months (respondent is eligible to complete survey, but still ask Q4)
- Within the last 12 months (respondent is eligible to complete survey, but still ask Q4)

**Q4. This questionnaire is looking to capture information from people who don't access the internet on their own. Which of the following statements best describes how you access and use the internet?**

- I access and use the internet on my own without assistance from another person
- I can only access and use the internet with assistance from another person (respondent is eligible to complete survey, go to Q5)

If participant answers **any** of the eligible responses from Q3 and Q4 then continue to Q5 and complete questionnaire. If participant does not select any of these then thank participant and explain that we only want to include people who are not regularly using the internet or those who access and use the internet with assistance from another person.

## Section B: main questionnaire

**Q5. Have you ever thought about using the internet (without assistance)?**

- Yes
- No

**Q6. Can you tell me what has stopped you from using the internet in the past (without assistance)?**

(Interviewer – read whole list to participant, tick all that apply)

- Too difficult
- Don't know much about it
- Don't know how to/don't have the skills
- I'm too old
- My eye sight
- Worried about internet safety
- Too expensive/cost
- Family/friend does it for me
- Don't want to
- I'd break it [computer/equipment]
- Don't have the accessibility software/technology required (JAWS, Zoomtext etc)
- Other, please specify \_\_\_\_\_

**Q7. Imagine if there were no obstacles to using the internet (without assistance), for example if cost were not an issue or you had the "know how" to use it, would you use it if you had the opportunity?**

- Yes (go to Q8)
- No (go to Q9)

**Q8. What sorts of things do you think you would use the internet for?**

(Interviewer – explain options further if required)

- Email
- Social networking – communicating with friends/family
- News/weather
- Shopping
- Banking/paying bills
- Media – watching films or TV/radio/games
- Information seeking
- Other, please state \_\_\_\_\_

(Go to Q10 after answering)

**Q9. If you still would not use the internet, can you tell me why not?**

**Q10. Overall, what are your views on the internet?**

(Probe whether it's a good or bad thing for older people, people with sight loss, is it useful for people with sight loss?)

## Section C: about you

**Q11. Are you male or female?**

- Male
- Female

**Q12. What age group do you fall into?**

- 65–69
- 70–74
- 75–79
- 80–84
- 85–89
- 90–94
- 95–99
- 100–104

**Q13. Can you tell me how long have you been blind or partially sighted?**

- Less than 12 months
- 1–3 years
- 4–5 years
- 6–10 years
- 11–20 years
- Over 20 years

**Thank you for taking part in the survey**

If you have any comments or questions please contact Angela Edwards on 020 7391 2132

## Troubleshooting

### **Where did you get my contact details from?**

From the RNIB contacts database. All participants have used an RNIB service at some point and will have agreed to take part in RNIB research.

### **Where will the research go? Is it confidential?**

The research has been commissioned by BT and the report will be presented to BT. It will be completely anonymous, no participants will be named. If you would like a copy you can contact Angela Edwards on 020 7391 2132.

### **Why are only retired people included in this survey?**

BT are keen for everyone to be online and there is also a government initiative called "Race Online" to get everyone online, including all age groups and all groups of society. It is recognised that older people aren't using the internet so much and they want to remove any barriers preventing this.

### **Why do you ask the equal opportunities questions?**

So BT can see if there are any differences in responses between the age and gender of respondents.

### **Where can I get help and information on technology issues?**

Call the RNIB Helpline on 0303 123 9999.



