



**R N I B**

Northern  
Ireland

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See differently

# #SeeMe #SeeDifferently

**RNIB's Manifesto for the Northern Ireland  
Local Council Elections 2023**



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# RNIB Northern Ireland

## About us

We're the Royal National Institute of Blind People (RNIB), one of the leading sight loss charities. We represent the largest community of blind and partially sighted people in Northern Ireland and across the rest of the UK. We're a catalyst for change – inspiring people with sight loss to transform their own personal experience, and their community.

Our focus is on giving the help, support and tools people need to live their lives independently. Everyday 250 people begin to lose their sight. RNIB has a crucial role to play in creating a world where there are no barriers to people with sight loss. **We want society, communities and individuals to think differently about sight loss.**



# An accessible society is essential

**Sight loss is a spectrum, and every eye condition affects someone's sight differently.** The majority (93 per cent) of people who are registered blind or partially sighted have some usable sight.

There are approximately 57,500 blind and partially sighted people in Northern Ireland. This number is set to rise. Our population is getting older. Sight loss affects people of all ages, but as we get older, we are increasingly likely to experience loss of sight. By 2030, we estimate there will be a 24 per cent increase in the number of people with sight loss.

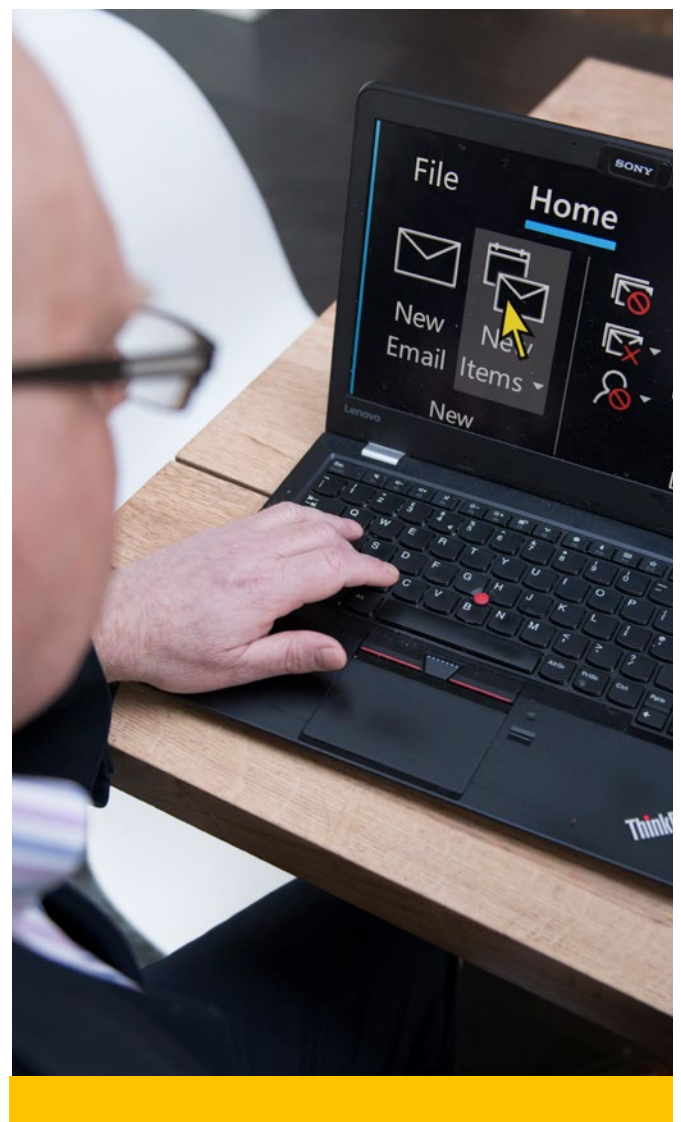
Policy makers must work alongside the blind and partially sighted community and partners and stakeholders, to raise awareness and place related issues at the centre of public policy planning. **We believe that by working together, we can bring about unprecedented change creating a better society for all.**

The pandemic, and the cost of living crisis, have both highlighted massive inequalities in our society and created new challenges for blind and partially sighted people.

**It's vital policy makers ensure that the needs of blind and partially sighted people are met in an evolving digital world.** Digital inclusion is an important element of accessibility and can help fight inequality, exclusion and loneliness.

**Everyone should be able to access public transport, our streets and local support and services safely.** Society has had to change, but it needs to be accessible for everyone. Blind and partially sighted people want, and need, to be consulted on the many changes taking place.

This needs to happen at the beginning of a project or scheme, through the design, implementation and completion stages. Too often, change has taken place without ensuring that the needs of people with sight loss have been fully consulted. This is unacceptable.





# Our manifesto asks

Our manifesto sets out the practical steps our local political representatives can take to support blind or partially sighted people.

- 1. Sight loss prevention and early intervention:** We need health and social care services that prevent avoidable sight loss.
- 2. Accessible health information:** We need health information that's available in alternative formats and urge the introduction of an Accessible Health Information Standard.
- 3. Accessible voting:** The right to cast your vote independently and secretly needs to be protected.
- 4. Accessible public transport:** Public transport should be accessible, reliable, and affordable for those living in both rural and urban communities.
- 5. A safe public space:** Streets and thoroughfares should be designed for everyone and allow pedestrians to walk safely, without obstacles.
- 6. Inclusive education:** Education that allows every child to reach their full potential.
- 7. Inclusive employment:** Only one in four blind and partially sighted people of working age are in paid employment. We want this to change.

## Making our public spaces accessible for all

Keeping public spaces safe, accessible and clean is vitally important, particularly for blind and partially sighted people. Ensuring the whole community can enjoy their area and access key services like healthcare, leisure, education and work is fundamental.

That is why inclusive design is better for everyone. Getting the features right in public spaces, makes a massive positive difference to blind and partially sighted people, and creates the freedom to move around safely and confidently.

RNIB is developing a Streets Charter to encourage local councils and government departments to adopt key principles of inclusive street design. We would welcome a conversation with councils about this and believe that:

- Councils should work with central government departments to ensure that pedestrians and moving vehicles are kept apart. Pavements and pedestrian areas must be kept for pedestrian use only.
- Detectable kerbs are needed to separate areas for pedestrians from all areas where vehicles are moving, including cycleways and roads.
- Pavements must be kept clear and clutter free – councils have a legal duty to ensure this. This includes ensuring pavement cafes are meeting their licensing requirements.
- Explore initiatives which reduce advertising boards in public spaces.

# Carry out accessible consultations/engage with blind and partially sighted people

An informed understanding of the range of access needs of disabled people, including the distinct needs of blind and partially sighted people, will improve designs at the development stage and help avoid lengthy public consultations and expensive retrofitting at later stages. We encourage engagement with disabled people, and their representatives, at the earliest possible stage:

1. All street or public realm designs must fully comply with Government guidance on street design and accessibility (unless councils have a good reason to depart from guidance) and run accessible public consultations.
2. Equality Impact Assessments must be undertaken (Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998) as these are a legal requirement.
3. We recommend that all those responsible for the design and delivery of strategy, policy and services should undertake Disability Equality training – designed and delivered by disabled people.
4. Disabled people who live in the local area must be informed of the proposed changes in an accessible format (e.g. audio files, telephone calls, tactile maps, photographs, braille, larger print etc). Councils should use data from the registers to identify local residents who may be affected, and who have sight loss and tailor the information as necessary.

## Parks, open spaces and playgrounds

There is an opportunity to reimagine our public spaces to ensure they are inclusive for all. Accessibility must be at the heart of all new designs and redesigns. As people with lived experience, we would strongly encourage early consultation with blind and partially sighted people.

Accessible wayfinding signage, tactile maps and other initiatives/ alterations can go some way to creating truly inclusive spaces for all. Following best practice and consulting with organisations like RNIB would be a good starting point for local councils.

## Transport

While many blind or partially sighted people live relatively independent lives, others struggle with the barriers which society collectively takes for granted.

Public transport is often a lifeline for many blind and partially sighted people. Between getting to and from meetings with family and friends, using buses and trains to access vital services, appointments, shopping or work, accessible transport is fundamental to allowing people to feel part of community life and to reinforcing wellbeing. However, many people report that many barriers remain.

This is particularly so in rural areas. About 40 per cent of people in Northern Ireland live in rural areas and many rely on community transport to allow them to leave their homes because of a lack of public transport nearby.

Historically and persistently over decades, the needs of disabled people, and the elderly, living in rural areas in Northern Ireland have been viewed, at best, as secondary.

The truth is that we have a considerable road to travel when it comes to the transport needs of blind and partially sighted people. Right now, there is a real threat towards funding for local community transport providers.

Services are at serious risk of closure. RNIB calls on locally elected political representatives to work together to preserve these vital connections for blind and partially sighted people.

### Asks:

Work with decision-makers and local transport providers to ensure that public transport is accessible, reliable, and affordable, for those living in both rural and urban communities.

Work with decision-makers and local transport providers to ensure accessibility standards on public transport vehicles, such as audio and visual announcements, are met; work to ensure the infrastructure in and around transport hubs is accessible for blind and partially sighted people.



## Accessible voting and elections

As Councils have some functions and responsibilities for the administration of local council elections, we recommend councils:

- Provide sight loss training to relevant council staff, delivered by blind and partially sighted people, to ensure that there is an understanding of the unique challenges faced by voters with sight loss.
- Proactively support and implement initiatives/alterations which make the process of voting easier for blind and partially sighted voters.
- Local councils must work alongside blind and partially sighted people, partners and stakeholders to raise awareness and place related issues at the centre of local government policy planning.

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## Contact us

We welcome the opportunity to work with our elected representatives on these issues. To get in touch with the RNIB NI Campaigns team email: [campaignsni@rnib.org.uk](mailto:campaignsni@rnib.org.uk)

## Find us on:



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