



**Building a world ready
for sight loss:
Our asks for the next
UK Government**

R N I B

See differently

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Message from Matt Stringer, Chief Executive Officer, RNIB



Around two million people live with sight loss in the UK, with 250 people beginning to lose their sight every day. And the number of people with sight loss is increasing at pace.

The Royal National Institute of Blind People (RNIB) is the leading sight loss charity in the UK, working across the four nations to campaign, drive change and provide services.

We want every blind and partially sighted person to live in a society that works for them, confident that they will be included and made welcome everywhere, and able to explore and fulfil their ambitions. But society is not yet ready to deal with sight loss.

We are calling on the next UK Government to:

- 1. Revolutionise the inadequate provision of life-changing vision rehabilitation services** which blind and partially sighted people are entitled to; their confidence and independence relies on this.
- 2. Develop and implement a National Eye Health Plan** to reduce waiting lists for treatment, ensure no one experiences avoidable sight loss, and guarantee everyone the right eye care at the right time.
- 3. Build a society where blind and partially sighted people can travel independently** by implementing our principles for inclusive design.
- 4. Enable blind and partially sighted people to succeed and progress in work,** making sure Access to Work has the resources to offer support without delays.
- 5. Give children with vision impairment the best start in life** by championing and funding the specialist educational support that they need to thrive.

As you prepare your manifesto, our ask is simple – we all have an important role to play in creating a fairer world with and for people with sight loss. With your help and support, that world can become reality.

Matt Stringer

Health and Social Care

Vision rehabilitation and independent living

Vision rehabilitation equips blind and partially sighted people with the essential skills and support they need to live independently. Under the Care Act, local authorities in England have a legal duty to provide this.

When delivered well, vision rehabilitation involves teaching people with sight loss how to carry out practical daily tasks with their new level of vision. White cane training, for example, is often one part of this, as well as providing equipment, gadgets and minor adaptations.

Yet, shockingly, some parts of the country have no service at all. RNIB knows of a case in which a person had a fatal accident while awaiting the training they needed to move around safely after a sight loss diagnosis; others have been waiting for up to four years for the support they are entitled to, limiting what they can do.

Empowering people with this support prevents future dependency on costly assistance, enables participation in work and community activities and reduces the need for more expensive care services.

We want the next UK Government to:

- Modernise vision rehabilitation to provide comprehensive skills for independent living including emotional and technological support.
- Ensure timely access to vision rehabilitation for everyone with sight loss.

This will...

Support the more than 24,000 people who receive a certificate of vision impairment in England and Wales every year, enabling them to live independently after a sight loss diagnosis.

In 2017, RNIB found that if just 10 per cent of expected positive outcomes of vision rehabilitation were experienced by service users in Surrey, the total value of costs avoided, reduced or deferred in the county was conservatively estimated at more than £3.4 million per year (for a service with a budget of £900,000).

Every day,

250 people

begin to lose their sight

Eye health

Eye health services face high demand due to ageing populations and people with conditions like diabetes. In March 2023 nearly 850,000 patients were waiting for ophthalmology treatments in the UK.

Tackling long waiting lists for ophthalmology appointments is crucial to reduce strain on the NHS and safeguard sight. Delays to diagnosis and treatment lead to avoidable sight loss, poorer quality of life and high levels of stress and anxiety for people while they wait. Delays also have a serious economic impact, costing the UK an estimated £36 billion in 2019, and likely to increase following the pandemic.

A National Eye Health Plan for England, designed with experts and patient groups, should guide the improvement of eye care services and support those at risk of sight loss.

We want the next UK Government to:

- Develop and implement a National Eye Health Plan for England, involving relevant stakeholders, to enhance eye care services and prioritising emotional and practical support.
- Tackle ophthalmology waiting lists and prioritise those most at risk.
- Publish annual progress reports for transparency and monitoring.
- Ensure timely access to information and support during waiting periods.
- Expand our Eye Care Liaison Officer (ECLO) provision to provide emotional support and practical advice for newly diagnosed individuals.

This will....

Help reduce avoidable sight loss in the UK and ultimately result in economic savings. RNIB ECLOs save clinicians' time and improve patient outcomes.



Mental health

People with sight loss are more likely to experience loneliness and isolation. According to the World Health Organisation, isolation and loneliness increase mortality by 29 per cent and 26 per cent respectively. Mental health support for those with sight loss needs an urgent review to improve people's outcomes and cut long-term costs.

We want the next UK Government to:

- Review and improve mental health support throughout the sight loss journey.
- Support health and social care professionals to talk to their patients with sight loss about mental health.

This will....

Reduce the need for more serious mental health interventions later and enable blind and partially sighted people to lead independent lives.

According to the World Health Organisation, isolation and loneliness increase mortality by

29% and **26%**

respectively.

Accessible healthcare information

Blind and partially sighted people have a legal right to receive accessible health and care information. Yet too many are still missing appointments or having to share their health information with other people because it's arriving in formats they cannot read. In 2020, a blind woman did not realise she was meant to be shielding from COVID-19 because she was sent four letters in the post, despite having requested health information by email.

Fully implementing accessible healthcare information standards will reduce missed appointments and improve patient outcomes.

We want the next UK Government to:

- Implement accessible information legislation and standards across health and social care.

This will....

Improve patient safety and health outcomes for blind and partially sighted people and enable them to manage their conditions better. Each missed outpatient appointment is estimated to cost the NHS £120.

Streets and transit

Inclusive streets

Blind and partially sighted people have fewer transport options available. Driving or cycling independently is not an option, so walking and public transport are key to maintaining independence, getting exercise, staying connected with family and community, and accessing work, and key services such as healthcare.

78 per cent of blind and partially sighted people told us walking journeys were their only, or main, form of outdoor physical exercise

Implementing accessible street design principles will ensure pedestrian safety, address cycling hazards and regulate the use of electric vehicles.

We want the next UK Government to:

- Adopt RNIB's Key Principles for Inclusive Street Design.
- Work with Active Travel England and disability groups to publish accessible street guidance.
- Develop national standards for accessible bus stop design.
- Regulate e-scooters and electric vehicles for safety.

This will....

Improve the safety of blind and partially sighted pedestrians, increasing confidence in getting to work, healthcare, leisure, and improving health and wellbeing.



Rail and bus travel

Retaining staffed ticket offices in fixed locations for assistance, and ensuring disability training standards for transport operators, will create more inclusive rail and bus travel.

Only three per cent of blind and partially sighted people can use a ticket vending machine without problems and people with sight loss are twice as likely to be digitally excluded, so buying tickets on websites or apps isn't an option.

We want the next UK Government to:

- Retain staffed transport facilities and implement disability training standards.

This will...

Help blind and partially sighted people travel independently – for work, study and leisure.



Equality and rights

The Equality Act

The Equality Act 2010 protects people from discrimination in the workplace and in wider society, but there are gaps and barriers to people enforcing their rights. Legislation is key lever for change

We want the next UK Government to:

- Uphold and strengthen the Equality Act including the treatment of manufactured goods. Ensure equality impact assessments are undertaken for all aspects of decision-making by public authorities, including procurement.
- Extend qualified one-way costs shifting to discrimination claims. This would reduce the financial risk to the claimant if their case does not succeed.

This will...

Ensure the Equality Act is effective in addressing the barriers that disabled people face in society today and increase the number of people who are able to enforce their rights.

"As a blind woman I face discrimination on a daily basis when services do not choose to be accessible. My rights to equality are not taken seriously. I have a right to this, but in practice it's not there. It's tiring, demoralising, and dehumanising. Sadly, I'm not alone in this."

There are

gaps and

barriers to people enforcing their rights.

Democratic inclusion

A 2022 survey revealed that only 22 per cent of blind or partially sighted individuals could vote independently and in secret, with 49 per cent unable to read election materials. Many who rely on postal votes need assistance to complete their ballot and as such are also excluded from voting in private.

Everyone has the right to vote in secret, to become an elected representative and to help shape society. Yet the lack of accessibility in these processes means we miss out on blind and partially sighted people's talents and deny their right to an independent and secret vote.

We want the next UK Government to:

- Tackle barriers to democracy for blind and partially sighted people including inaccessible election websites and communications.
- Proactively identify accessible voting solutions and roll these solutions out for UK-administered elections.
- Review and revise the postal voting system to make it accessible for blind and partially sighted people.
- Improve support available for blind and partially sighted people to become elected officials.

This will...

Enable the estimated two million people with sight loss in the UK to vote independently and in secret, including people who are losing their vision due to age-related sight conditions who may not consider themselves as blind or partially sighted.

It could also result in an increase of blind and partially sighted people being more politically active.

"My helper disagrees with my vote and I have no way to be sure she voted as I wished..."

Only

22% of blind and partially sighted people could vote independently and in secret.

Education and employment

Children and young people with vision impairment

Equal education access is vital for every child's lifelong success. In the UK, around two in 1,000 children have a visual impairment and need specialist support to learn on equal terms with their sighted peers. But inconsistent provision is denying many children proper support.

Working in partnership with the University of Birmingham – and others, RNIB created the Curriculum Framework for Children and Young People with Vision Impairment, which ensures evidence-based education.



We want the next UK Government to:

- Ensure all children and young people with a vision impairment reach their full potential by endorsing and embedding in education policy the Curriculum Framework for Children and Young people with a Vision Impairment.
- Fund the training and placement of additional Qualified Teachers of children and young people with a Vision Impairment so that all local authority Vision Impairment education teams are adequately resourced.
- Fund the training of additional Habilitation Specialists to teach mobility and independent living skills.

This will...

Allow more than 40,000 children and young people – up to the age of 25 – with a vision impairment to reach their full potential and leave school with a high-quality education and with independent living and socialisation skills.

More than

40,000 children and young people (0-25) have a vision impairment

The UK Government's Access to Work programme

Blind and partially sighted people can thrive in the majority of workplaces; yet the employment gap for people with sight loss is twice that of other disabled individuals, hindering our earning potential.

The Department for Work and Pensions' Access to Work (AtW) scheme aims to support economic independence by providing assistive technology and in-person support. However, delays in processing AtW applications have put thousands of jobs at risk, adversely affecting mental health and career progress. Swift AtW support is crucial to closing the employment gap for people with sight loss.

We want the next UK Government to:

- Review resourcing, including staff, for Access to Work so that claims are processed promptly, and support is put in place within four weeks of any application.

This will...

Get support to people more quickly. In June 2023 nearly 23,000 people were waiting for their Access to Work claims to be processed. These are all people who have secured work but cannot access the support they need. An effective process would see thousands of people, who are currently facing delays, in work and earning, with the support they are entitled to.



Finance and leisure

Cost of living

Cost of living challenges disproportionately affect blind and partially sighted people. Even before recent price hikes, a fifth faced financial difficulties, and as costs rise, many are being forced to cut back on essential activities.

A 2023 RNIB survey showed how many relied on disability benefits for bills and had reduced their leisure and social activities due to financial constraints.

We want the next UK Government to:

- Make targeted welfare support available for every blind and partially sighted person.
- Review and rebase benefits so everyone can afford an adequate standard of living and manage the extra costs that come with sight loss.

This will...

Reduce the number of blind and partially sighted people having to choose between heating, eating and housing costs.



Financial inclusion

We are calling on the banking industry to consistently make the reasonable adjustments which blind and partially sighted people are entitled to under the 2010 Equality Act, as well as to address digital exclusion, by ensuring services and financial information are accessible for blind and partially sighted customers.

There should be a focus on preserving tactile indicators and audio features on financial technologies, such as ATMs.

We want the next UK Government to:

- Ensure the maintenance of in-person financial support and accessibility.
- Promote and advocate for accessible banking services.
- Work with the financial services industry to maintain accessible services and embossed bank cards.

This will....

Support the creation of a more inclusive society while enabling more businesses to benefit from the spending power of disabled households in the UK, worth £249 billion a year. By making financial systems accessible, businesses will be more inclusive for blind and partially sighted consumers.

Leisure

By improving accessibility in video-on-demand services and gaming, we will enhance leisure opportunities for blind and partially sighted individuals.

We want the next UK Government to:

- Enhance accessibility regulations for video-on-demand services.
- Introduce accessibility regulations for video games and platforms.

This will....

Enable blind and partially sighted people to participate in gaming and experience the same TV programmes as everyone else, improving wellbeing. It has the potential to increase the customer base of gaming and entertainment companies.

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Summary of RNIB asks to the next UK Government

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Mental health

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Accessible healthcare information

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Inclusive streets

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Rail and bus travel

- Retain staffed transport facilities and implement disability training standards.

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