



**R N I B**

Northern  
Ireland

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See differently

**#SeeMe**

**#SeeDifferently**

**RNIB's Manifesto for the Northern Ireland  
Assembly Elections 2022**



# RNIB Northern Ireland

## About us

We're the Royal National Institute of Blind People (RNIB), one of the UK's leading sight loss charities and the largest community of blind and partially sighted people.

We're a catalyst for change – inspiring people with sight loss to transform their own personal experience, their community and, ultimately, society as

a whole. Our focus is on giving them the help, support and tools they need to realise their aspirations.

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 see differently about sight loss.



# An accessible society is essential

**There are approximately 56,400 blind and partially sighted people in Northern Ireland. This number is set to rise.**

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.

By 2030, we estimate there will be a 24 per cent increase in the number of people with sight loss.

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.

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 and create a better society for all.

Coronavirus both highlighted the inequalities of society and created new challenges for blind and partially sighted people.

New street and shop layouts, social distancing, inaccessible information, increased risk of isolation. The impact has been immense.

We've been disconnected from each other and many have struggled to access essentials, including food and medicines.

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.



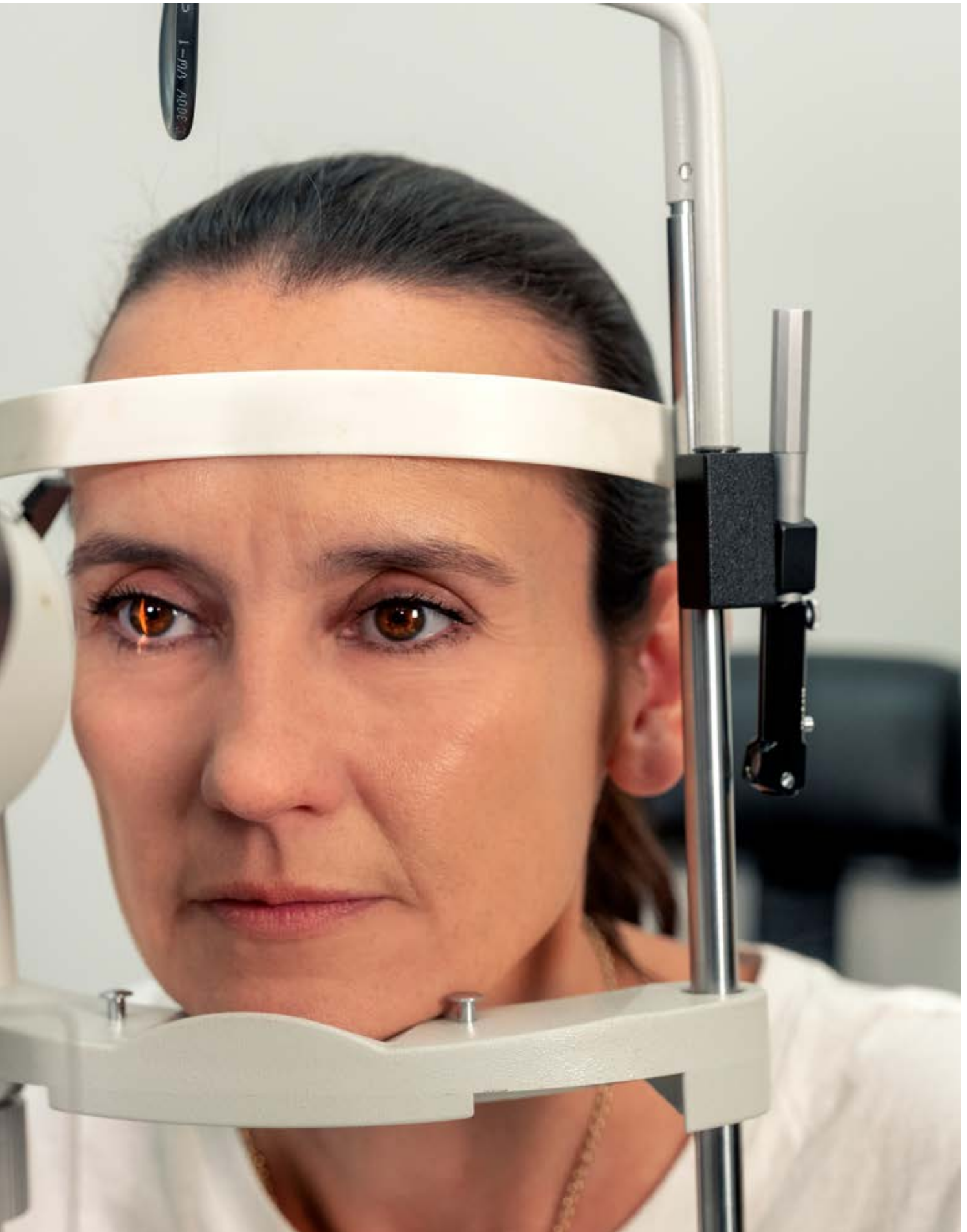


Accessible public information is vital. The pandemic has reinforced this need. We urge all service providers in Northern Ireland - whether public, private or community and voluntary - to engage with RNIB and blind and partially sighted people to ensure all information they provide, across all media, including online, is accessible.

When the pandemic first struck, RNIB responded to these challenges by adapting to ensure the continuity of our service provision across Northern Ireland. We have worked co-operatively with central and local government, our colleagues in the statutory and voluntary sectors, as well as local businesses and their representatives, to ensure that short term needs were met. We worked with supermarkets to secure priority online shopping slots and we worked with the Department of Health to provide advice for staff involved with administering the coronavirus vaccine to blind and partially sighted patients.

So many people and organisations have helped us help blind and partially sighted people over the last two years of challenge and change. We want to tap into that spirit of collaboration and support to make things better for everyone as we shape society's future together.





# Our Manifesto asks

Our manifesto sets out practical steps which the NI Assembly, our local political representatives, executive departments, agencies and public bodies, can take to support those in our society who are blind or partially sighted.

## 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 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 that's accessible, reliable, and affordable, for those living in both urban and rural communities.

## 5. A safe public space

Streets and thoroughfares that are 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 to change this.

# Sight loss prevention and early intervention

Waiting times for ophthalmology consultations, diagnosis, and treatments, continues to be a significant concern. What has long been a challenging environment for health and social care, with increasing demand levels coupled with budgetary and workforce constraints, has been further exacerbated by pressures resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic.

As of 30 September 2021, Department of Health statistics indicate that 6.2 per cent of the 358,346 patients who were waiting for a first consultant led outpatients' appointment, were in Ophthalmology.

## RNIB calls for:

The next Assembly/Executive to prioritise ending preventable sight loss in Northern Ireland by:

- Investing in and expanding, the use of targeted interventions, such as 'Mega Clinics', community-based care and support and the greater use of accessible patient communication, to address waiting times and treatment delays.
- Ensuring that all people diagnosed with sight loss, move through diagnosis to treatment and through to confidence and independence, through a well-managed sight loss pathway.

- Developing and overseeing an eyecare workforce plan that is clearly linked to capacity and demand data.
- Pledging to fund and embed initiatives, such as #EyeCareWeCare, which are designed to address early intervention and the prevention of a range of sight loss conditions.
- Ensuring that a move towards greater community-based provision in the eye care pathways, is underpinned by a data and research strategy.
- Developing a regional ophthalmic digital technology strategy that is accessible and provides options for electronic referral to community-based support services.
- Developing links between eyecare clinicians, existing health networks, multi-disciplinary healthcare teams and voluntary and community sector organisations.





# Accessible health information

**Blind and partially sighted people have the right to read their own personal health information. We are concerned that the health information rights of people who are blind or partially sighted are being denied.**

Research shows that the majority of blind and partially sighted people cannot read the health information they receive (RNIB 2009). In addition, RNIB's Community Engagement project consulting with people living with sight loss across NI, 2018/2019, showed that accessible information is still a key barrier for many in relation to privacy and independence.

- **72 per cent** of people with sight loss report they cannot read personal health information given to them by their GP.
- **22 per cent** say they have missed an appointment due to information being sent to them in an inaccessible format.
- **65 per cent** have not heard of any legislation or policies which are designed to protect them from discrimination in receiving health information.
- **73 per cent** of healthcare professionals report that either their organisation didn't have a clear accessible health information policy, or they were unaware if one exists.
- **28 per cent** wrongly believe people prefer to receive information relayed to them by others, such as relatives or carers.

- **71 per cent** reported a lack of training in meeting accessible health information needs.

## **RNIB calls for:**

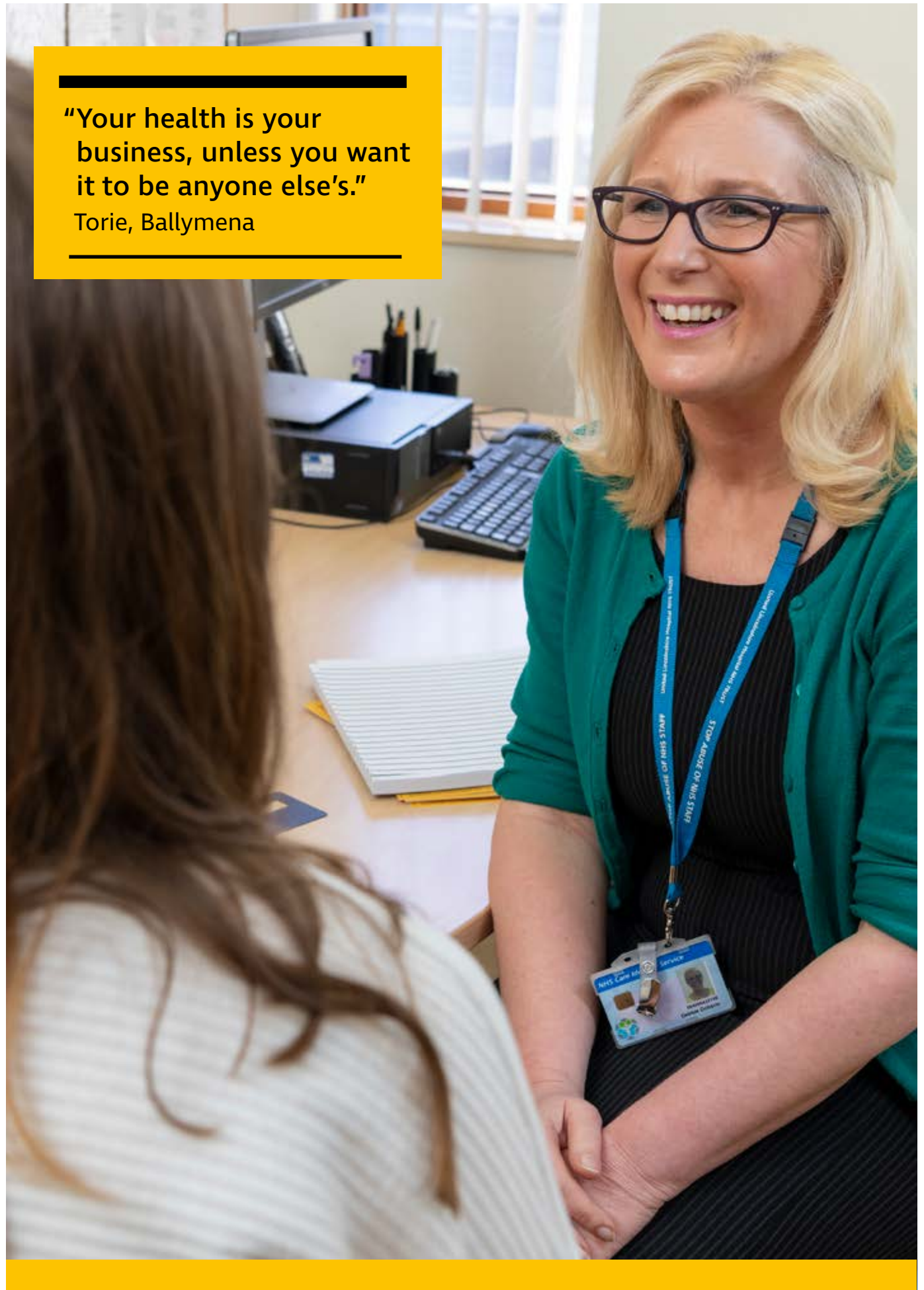
- An Accessible Health Information Standard to be introduced in Northern Ireland. In July 2016, the NHS Accessible Health Information Standard came into force in England. It mandates that all healthcare providers must provide information in a format their patients can read. This would ensure a system is in place in NI to identify, record, flag and share access to information needs within an individual service and between providers.

**"I am unable to read any information that comes to me regarding my health. I am totally blind. All the information comes to me in print. I have to rely on my daughter to read this information to me."**

Margaret, Lisburn



**“Your health is your  
business, unless you want  
it to be anyone else’s.”**  
Torie, Ballymena



# Accessible voting

The right to vote independently, and in secret, is a cornerstone of our democracy. Yet nearly 150 years after the Ballot Act – which guaranteed the right to vote in secret – blind and partially sighted people still face unacceptable barriers to exercising their democratic right to vote.

RNIB has campaigned on this issue for many years, calling on the UK Government to create an accessible voting system and guarantee blind and partially sighted voters can access information about elections and candidates independently. When voting, blind and partially sighted people, without any assistance, should be able to:

- review the candidates on the ballot paper.
- reliably find, and mark, their chosen candidate on the official ballot paper.
- be in sole control of the secrecy of their vote.

**“I’ve been eligible to vote for over 25 years now and have yet to vote independently or in secret. Every single time I’ve invoked my democratic right to cast a private vote, at least one other person, if not more, has known who I voted for.”**

Joe, Belfast

## **RNIB calls for:**

The Northern Ireland Assembly to support the right of blind and partially sighted citizens, to vote independently by:

- Supporting the roll out of a suitable audio and tactile voting solution, to enable blind and partially sighted people to vote more independently, and in secret.
- Ensuring that the Electoral Office establish a local register of blind and partially sighted people, and collect information on preferred formats, using them to provide information in formats which voters can read.
- Advocating for investment in training for polling station staff in how to support blind and partially sighted voters.
- Requesting that the Electoral Office publicise better accessible voting options, and the support available within polling stations.
- Support a review and revision of the postal voting system to make it accessible for blind and partially sighted people.
- Ensuring that party manifestos and election materials, including online content, is accessible for blind and partially sighted voters.

# Accessible transport

While many people with sight loss are living 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. Getting to and from meetings with family and friends, to using buses and trains in order to access vital services is fundamental toward reinforcing positive wellbeing. However, many people report that many barriers remain.

Given that Northern Ireland is largely rural, there are issues around the frequency of bus schedules as well as the fact that train travel is non-existent in many areas. Making transport truly accessible would go a long way towards giving blind and partially sighted people greater independence.

## RNIB calls for:

- A strategic and consistent approach to community transport provision across Northern Ireland, ending the current postcode lottery.
- The roll out of a fully accessible smartphone travel app for blind and partially sighted people.
- Ensure high quality audio announcement systems are in place across all Translink bus and train services.
- A review of the Concessionary Scheme and the inclusion of free travel for partially sighted people and free travel for companions of blind or partially sighted passengers.





# Safe public space

It is vitally important our streets are fully accessible for all users, and particularly blind and partially sighted pedestrians. Advertising boards, pavement parking, street furniture, litter, eScooters and construction works have all been cited as regular concerns.

## RNIB calls for:

- Pavements to be kept clear and clutter free. Government departments have a responsibility to ensure that the spaces which they are responsible for, do not pose a hazard or obstruction for pedestrians.



- With an increasing number of capital works programmes to improve street layouts, traffic flow and the multi-functional use of public spaces, getting the features right in pavements and roads can make a real difference to the ability of blind and partially sighted people, to move around safely and confidently.
- Central and Local Government, councils, planners and designers must check thoroughly as to how their new designs or proposed changes align with the RNIB's 'Key Principles of Inclusive Street Design', before progressing to public consultation and development.
- Detectable kerbs are needed to separate areas for pedestrians from all areas where vehicles are moving, including cycleways and roads.
- Accessible signal-controlled pedestrian crossings over roads and cycleways must be embedded in project design principles, particularly in locations and along routes to essential public services.
- While a greener future is beneficial to everyone, we ask that blind and partially sighted people are considered at the pre-design stage of any initiatives.



# Inclusive education

Children and young people with vision impairment in Northern Ireland can experience educational disadvantages and their basic educational needs are often overlooked.

The transitions that all young people face, namely moving from primary to secondary school, choosing a career path, and moving to further/higher education and then into employment, can be challenging. However, for children and young people with vision impairment, these transitions can be even more difficult as a result of digital exclusion and an overall lack of understanding of the impact of sight loss.

## RNIB calls for:

- The Northern Ireland Assembly and Executive, to value children and young people with vision impairment and to invest in their futures to ensure that they can develop the skills and resilience they need to achieve their goals and thrive in society.

- To incorporate the specialist Curriculum Framework for children and young people with a vision impairment into statutory policy and guidance.
- To ensure streamlined, sustainable funding for services providing emotional and mental health support for children and young people with vision impairment.
- To develop and fund a strategy to address accessibility and digital exclusion in education, which includes a focus on assisted technologies for children and young people with vision impairment.



# Inclusive employment

Only 27 per cent of people with sight loss of working age are in employment, compared to 74.9 per cent of the general population – a disability employment gap that places people with sight loss among those furthest away from the labour market.

People with sight loss achieving high levels of educational attainment does not translate into employment prospects.

People with sight loss face many barriers when looking for work. Assumptions and low expectation levels from employers, or concerns about the cost of adjustments, are common misconceptions and inaccessible job adverts and application processes further compound the challenges.

To help close the disability employment gap, employers need to know that government funding, such as Access to Work, can meet additional support costs for disabled employees. Employers also need to be aware of funded programmes delivering tailored support to individuals with a disability to meet their specific needs in the workplace. The UK government's post-Brexit UK Shared Prosperity fund (UKSPF), which replaces the EU 'structural funds', needs to provide adequate and timely replacement funding to ensure the continuation of specialist employment support.

## RNIB calls for:

- The Government and local authorities to lead by example to ensure that their information systems, websites and recruitment processes are accessible and promote the employment of disabled people in sustainable jobs that offer career progression.
- To promote Access to Work to employers so they know there is support available to meet additional costs for adjustments required by disabled employees.
- To ensure the replacement programme for Workable NI is adequately resourced and continues to meet the requirements of disabled employees and employers, supporting disabled people to stay in work.
- Highlight the new UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF), which is crucial to support blind and partially sighted people into work.

- To offer assurances that there will be no gap between existing and new funding streams.
- To give powers to allocate funding through the UKSPF which must respect Northern Ireland's devolved status and responsibility for social inclusion and economic development. This will also help ensure compliance with the

statutory duty to promote good community relations and equal opportunities.

- Ensure that new funding at least matches the current total ESF resources, and that this is futureproofed for inflation increases.



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