



# The Impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on blind and partially sighted people



## Foreword

**As Chief Executive of Sight Scotland and Sight Scotland Veterans, I'm delighted to join the charities at a critical time for blind and partially sighted people.**

The Covid-19 pandemic has not only disproportionately impacted disabled people and brought additional challenges to those with sight loss, but has also provided us with an opportunity to do things differently. The number of people who are blind or partially sighted in Scotland is expected to increase by 30,000 in the next decade to over 200,000 people so now, more than ever, it's vital their lived experience informs decisions about how society recovers from this period and becomes more inclusive for all.

We've heard directly about the challenges those with sight loss experienced during lockdown and the new issues people are facing as they re-enter public life. Difficulties with following social distancing rules, access to healthcare, additional street clutter, the lack of accessible information, and loneliness and isolation are just a handful of things that have impacted and continue to impact the quality of life of blind and partially sighted people. This report explores these challenges and looks in detail at what actions we can take to better support those living with sight loss. We're also grateful to John Baptie, John Kinnis, Amanda Whitfield, Bilal Iqbal and Marie O'Donnell for sharing their stories and experiences and giving us a glimpse of what life has been like for a blind or partially sighted person during the pandemic.



In 2019 we worked with the Mental Health Foundation and published our policy report 'Emotional Support for Sight Loss' which looked at the wider emotional impact of sight loss and how those who received support from us experienced mental health challenges. We found the majority of respondents said they had experienced challenges to their mental health as a result of their visual impairment, yet two thirds of people said they had not been put in touch with a support service to help them with the emotional impact of their sight loss, following their diagnosis.

The previous year, we had dug deeper into the links between loneliness and sight loss and found that many people living with sight loss said they felt isolated. We wanted to build on these findings to look at how the Covid-19 pandemic has impacted these existing issues and what additional challenges have come to light. Our research in this report looks back at the past two years and sets out the areas where we believe more work is needed to respond to new and existing issues.

This report clearly demonstrates why it's vital to involve people with vision loss in shaping how we tackle these head on.

We hope the policy proposals in this report will be given full consideration and will inspire action to create a Scotland that is truly inclusive and accessible. Future generations will look back at this point in history and recognise the unique opportunity for social change. Now is the time to lean into change, to embrace new ways of working and to take meaningful action that so many disabled people have long been calling for.

**Craig Spalding**

Chief Executive of Sight Scotland  
and Sight Scotland Veterans



# About Sight Scotland and Sight Scotland Veterans

**Sight Scotland and Sight Scotland Veterans form Scotland's largest third sector visual impairment organisation. For more than 225 years we have been supporting people with sight loss and blindness.**

Sight Scotland provides learning at the Royal Blind School and education outreach services; community support including adult rehabilitation services and family support; and specialist residential care for young adults with visual impairment and complex needs. We also run the Scottish Braille Press which provides supported employment for disabled people and is a leading provider of accessible media.

Sight Scotland Veterans provides free support to ex-servicemen and women affected by sight loss in Scotland, regardless of the cause. We are the only Scotland-based charities which fund medical research into eye health. Our mission is to reach everyone in Scotland where and when they need us.

This report was produced by Sight Scotland and Sight Scotland Veterans, and published in February 2022.

# Impacts of Covid-19 on people with sight loss

**There are approximately 180,000 people in Scotland living with significant sight loss. Blind and partially sighted people have been profoundly and disproportionately affected by the impact of Coronavirus and this has had serious consequences for their fundamental human rights.**

While we all understand how necessary restrictions to everyday life have been to reduce infection, the greater impact of these restrictions on blind and partially sighted people was not always considered. That's why in August 2020 we undertook the biggest survey of people with visual impairments since lockdown, which asked over 400 blind and partially sighted people about the challenges they faced and their concerns as lockdown measures were eased. A year on, we revisited some of the issues identified and conducted another survey in 2021 to find out if anything had changed and what challenges remained for people with sight loss.

## Equalities and human rights

During the pandemic, blind and partially sighted people were not designated as a vulnerable group. This decision has been detrimental to people with visual impairment and has impacted on their human rights as set out in the United Nations Convention on the Rights for Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD). Many people living with other disabilities, including those living with other sensory impairments, have been affected in the same way. The Convention states that disabled people should be able to live independently, participate fully in all aspects of life and have access to the physical environment, transport and other facilities and services open or provided to the public – yet these rights have not always been upheld. Many premises, public areas and public transport were not accessible to blind and partially sighted people. Specific challenges with social distancing were not recognised and accounted for adequately.



## Adequate standard of living and social protection

Article 28 of the UNCRPD requires that states recognise the right of disabled people to an adequate standard of living for themselves and their families. This includes adequate food, clothing and housing, and the right to the continuous improvement of living conditions. Many blind and partially sighted people have struggled to access basic provisions during the pandemic. The withdrawal of some care services, particularly at the outset of the pandemic, also affected blind and partially sighted people.

## Participation rights

The Convention enshrines the right of disabled people to participate fully and equally in the community, education and all aspects of life. Unfortunately, participation rights have been affected for many groups of people during the pandemic and there have been distinct and disproportionate barriers to participation for blind and partially sighted people.

There is a risk there will be greater inequalities in relation to participation as we continue to respond to the demands of the pandemic. For example, social distancing is a prime example of a measure which can cause additional



barriers to participating in education, employment and community life. These barriers will be exacerbated without additional measures to help people maintain social distancing. Additional measures should social distancing be required again include tactile markers to define two-metre spaces, awareness campaigns on visual impairment and social distancing and measures to allow support from sighted guides.

## **Social distancing**

Social distancing is an integral measure to reduce spread of the virus but when in place it has presented huge problems for blind and partially sighted people who were unable to tell if they were two metres away from another person. The introduction of queues to access

premises and social distancing measures within them were often impossible for many people with visual impairments to negotiate, as they couldn't see markers or signs. As restrictions eased and public spaces became busier again this intensified the challenge of keeping distanced as there were more people to navigate. Should social distancing return in future, without action to communicate social distancing measures in accessible ways, there is a risk the same challenges will be experienced by blind and partially sighted people.



**“Many blind and partially sighted people have struggled to access basic provisions during the pandemic.”**

## Shopping

In the height of the pandemic, access to supermarkets to obtain basic provisions was largely inaccessible for blind and partially sighted people due to social distancing. Most blind and partially sighted people do not have a guide dog and often rely on touch and guiding from another person to navigate the shop. Under social distancing measures, this was longer possible.

In addition, because people with visual impairment were not designated as a vulnerable group during the pandemic,

they weren't prioritised for food deliveries by many supermarkets and were not able to access delivery services they had previously relied on. While some progress was made with some retailers on this situation, a number of blind and partially sighted people had to rely on food parcels or had to ration food during the pandemic.

## Accessibility

Accessibility of public spaces and accessibility of information are key rights that have been significantly impacted. In the pandemic we witnessed how many premises, public areas and public transport became inaccessible to

**“ Supermarkets are now totally inaccessible for blind and partially sighted people due to social distancing. The majority of blind and partially sighted people do not have a guide dog and often rely on touch and guiding from another person to navigate the shop. Under social distancing measures, this is no longer possible.”**

**Vicky, Royal Blind School parent – June 2020**





blind and partially sighted people, and how the specific challenges of social distancing weren't recognised. There have also been problems with how public health information has been communicated. Information in alternative formats such as braille, audio and large print has not always been easily available, leaving many blind and partially sighted people without vital and important information.

## Healthcare

We've heard first-hand about concerns around the inaccessibility of the Covid-19 vaccination passport app. This includes

incompatibility with screen readers and a lack of audio guidance to indicate if a person is in the correct position when taking their photo. Without the app, many blind and partially sighted people are not able to demonstrate their vaccination status. A negative lateral flow test result was required to enter certain premises – however, self-testing lateral flow and PCR kits are also very difficult for a blind or partially sighted person to use unaided, and there is a lack of support available to support someone to take a test. Many walk-in test centres are also inaccessible, adding to an already challenging situation.





## Community spaces

Additional street clutter by way of outdoor seating and 'pop up' venues added to concern surrounding access to public spaces, as did the introduction of some Spaces for People schemes. While many welcomed the principle of the scheme to widen pavements and create more cycle paths, the design of some schemes has not considered the needs of blind and partially sighted people.

We heard how some people have had near-misses with cyclists as they were unaware of their presence or the cyclist hadn't taken account of, or been aware of, their visual impairment. Tactile elements such as kerbs and raised paving stones have been removed in pedestrianised zones, leaving people with sight loss confused when navigating their environment and worried to take routes that were once familiar.

"I tried to go out on one occasion on my own. I wanted to go along the street and unknown to me, I passed a queue at the post office. People started shouting at me that I was jumping the queue but didn't realise I wasn't going towards the road crossing and actually going into the queue. I had my long cane but no one seemed to acknowledge that I was blind."

**Veteran with sight loss – August 2020**

## Public awareness

The pandemic has highlighted a lack of public awareness about visual impairment and the impacts of sight loss. A YouGov online survey commissioned by Sight Scotland and Sight Scotland Veterans of 1008 adults undertaken between 20 August – 24 August 2020 found

that half of people surveyed would not be confident about offering support to someone with visual impairment to help them cope with social distancing. Sadly, we even heard of blind and partially sighted people experiencing abuse when they were not able to follow social distancing measures. We also found some people appeared not to know that a person using a white cane is blind or partially sighted and would therefore not make way for them on the pavement. These experiences left many people with sight loss upset and distressed and, in some cases, reluctant to go out and about in their own communities.

## Public transport

Social distancing was also an issue for blind and partially sighted people when taking public transport. Access to public transport is crucial for very many blind and partially sighted people; many expressed concern at not receiving assistance, especially on trains and taxis, due to social distancing measures and worried how they would navigate their way safely. This caused many people with sight loss to remain at home even when restrictions began to be lifted and travel could assume again. This meant some people didn't feel able to visit family and friends, adding to social isolation and loneliness.

“How will social distancing be managed for blind and partially sighted people on public transport? Many people fear that they will receive less assistance especially when using trains and taxis due to social distancing.”

**Kirin Saeed, Braille Proof Reader,  
Scottish Braille Press – June 2020**

## Schools and workplaces

Pupils with visual impairment returning to school faced additional challenges to fully sighted pupils, as their reliance on tactile signs and navigation by touch raised issues around their risk of exposure to the virus. They also weren't able to follow social distancing measures in the same way as other pupils. This situation was even more difficult due to the reduction in specialist support available to some pupils.

Similar challenges were faced by blind and partially sighted employees in workplaces. While some are and continue to work from home, this can create challenges around increased risk of isolation.

“As a blind person living in Scotland in lockdown, I am a bit nervous about what the situation is going to look like when we go back to school in August. It is most likely that there will be social distancing measures in place in my school. As a blind person, I don't know how on earth we are going to achieve the rule of staying two metres apart from everyone at all times. I think I will have difficulty maintaining social distance from everyone around me in school.”

**Angus. pupil supported at an  
East Lothian school – June 2020**

## Loneliness and isolation

Our 2018 report on ‘Social Connections and Sight Loss’ found around two thirds of blind and partially sighted people have experienced loneliness because of their sight loss. The pandemic has impacted this significantly due to the lack of physical contact with others and limited social interactions. Despite significant efforts by charities and services to find innovative ways to continue to provide support, social distancing meant many were unable to leave their homes or felt anxious about doing so. This was especially challenging for those who rely on sighted guides; if guides were based outwith their household they were not able to receive this support and so unable to leave their home – missing out on even a daily walk or exercise. This has left many blind and partially sighted people not feeling confident

about going back into the community. The impact of the Omicron variant also brought about another pause to the operations of many face-to-face support services.

For those who are living with sight loss as well as other health conditions, such as dementia, social isolation can contribute to further cognitive decline. Through our Sight Scotland Veterans outreach services we’ve witnessed first-hand how a significant period without face to face contact can accelerate cognitive decline as a result of social isolation. This has also impacted physical capabilities too, as some people with sight loss have told us how they have forgotten vital rehabilitation and navigation skills during lockdown due to not being able to leave their home.

“Sight loss certainly made the lockdown experience more difficult for me because I’m completely dependent on public transport and now I’d only use it in emergencies. Even though the charity’s lunch clubs and activities have been postponed, the outreach team have kept in touch with me throughout which has been helpful. But because I’m not meeting with other veterans with sight loss due to these restrictions, it does cause problems for my morale. Another full lockdown would keep us from meeting for even longer.”

**John Baptie, age 73, veteran with sight loss – October 2020**



## Employment

The latest figures [2020-2021] show the disability employment gap has risen to 32.8% – up 2% from the previous year. There is a risk that the progress made since 2016 could be undone in the wake of the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic. This is a particular concern for those who are blind or partially sighted who are twice as likely not to be in paid employment as people who are not living with disabilities.

For those with sight loss, being out of work or struggling to find employment can have a serious detrimental impact on mental

health, wellbeing, and financial security. People with a disability are more likely to live in poverty and may have increased living costs associated with disability related expenses. When a disabled person falls out of work for an extended period, they are more likely to struggle to return to the workplace and are twice as likely to remain unemployed. For those in work, the average pay for disabled employees in Scotland was 16.5% lower than non-disabled employees [2019].



# Methodology

In 2020 we conducted the biggest survey of people with visual impairment since lockdown. Over 400 people shared their experiences of how Covid-19 was impacting them as a person living with sight loss.

We asked them about how they felt going out and about in their communities and what additional impact their sight loss had on their experience of lockdown. In 2021, we conducted another survey of 200 people to take a further look at the impacts of the pandemic and to assess what life has been like for people with sight loss a year on.

## Key findings 2020

Over two thirds of respondents found lockdown a more difficult experience because of their sight loss.



**70%** said their sight loss had made lockdown a worse experience.



**Over 40%** said they were still not confident about going back into the community with social distancing measures in place.



**90%** said they didn't think there is enough awareness about visual impairment among the general public.

## Key findings 2021



**58%**

said they felt that there has not been enough understanding among the general public of the problems social distancing causes blind and partially sighted people.



**29%**

said they didn't feel confident about returning to their previous routine while social distancing is in place.

# Case study: John Baptie

**John Baptie, 73, is an Army veteran and started experiencing Charles Bonnet Syndrome (CBS) in 2013 but didn't know anything about the condition at the time. This condition causes people to experience silent, visual hallucinations that can cause great distress.**

John had sight loss in his left eye for many years but his Charles Bonnet Syndrome only started bothering him when he started losing sight in his right eye. Completely unaware of the condition at the time, he says the first years were “hell” as he thought he was “losing his mind”.

John said: “Nobody had ever mentioned Charles Bonnet Syndrome to me before, not even at eye clinic. It really came to light with Sight Scotland Veterans' support. I realise now these things I'm seeing aren't real. When it started happening, I did not understand what it was. I thought I was haunted. I went through hell thinking that I had dementia and that things were going to get worse. I even paid for my funeral because I thought that was it.”

During the height of the pandemic Sight Scotland Veterans linked in with the CBS campaign group Esme's Umbrella as our Rehabilitation team had noticed some of our veterans had increased or changing CBS experiences. We were able to offer the 'Esme's Friends' CBS support group to Sight Scotland Veterans service users via telephone. This successfully provided a safe, warm and understanding space for veterans with sight loss to share with their experiences and feelings about CBS, as well as tips for how

to cope. Many had been unaware of CBS for so long, and now understand the reason for the hallucinations. They know they are not alone in living with the condition. With CBS still such a little-known condition, raising awareness of CBS and its effects play a vital part in overall support for sight loss.

John said: “I would be sat down and see ginormous spiders coming towards me. I'd see spiders floating through the air coming towards me. I would see people dressed in black and when I approached them, I couldn't see their faces. That made me think I was being haunted. When I was looking at something I'd swear it was moving, even though I knew it wasn't. Even when I'd go out on a walk and I knew where I was going, I would get lost. When you don't know what it is, you think you're going mad.”

“It's a great relief to know that Sight Scotland Veterans and Esme's Umbrella have taken up the gauntlet with this. I'm very happy with the eye clinic support too. People see sight loss and blindness, but they don't understand the complex things that can go a long with it, like Charles Bonnet Syndrome.”



# Case study: John Kinnis

**Army veteran John Kinnis, 84, of Paisley, has glaucoma and is registered as severely sight impaired. Living alone and unable to leave the house without a sighted guide, he was at home 24 hours a day throughout the lockdowns, and greatly missed the companionship he had found at one of Sight Scotland Veterans' activity centres for veterans with sight loss, the Hawkhead Centre in Paisley.**

John was delighted at being able to finally return to the Hawkhead Centre when it reopened its doors in Spring 2021. It had closed in line with pandemic restrictions in March 2020.

John said: "I was so pleased to be able to get that companionship back and get out of the house again. That same atmosphere of friendship is still there. Sight loss meant that it was more difficult to get out and meet people, even before the lockdowns started."

Throughout the pandemic, Sight Scotland Veterans adapted its ways of delivering support, including telephone calls and one-on-one walks. Many of the veterans we support had told us prior to the pandemic that they have experienced loneliness due to the impact of their sight loss. Without much-loved visits to the centre, for many it made the pandemic even more difficult to bear.

John said: "In the lockdowns, talking books helped me enormously. I did have phone calls from the Hawkhead Centre staff while the centre was closed and did appreciate that

they were keeping in touch. When restrictions allowed, a Sight Scotland Veterans staff member was able to take me for a sighted guide walk around the park."

The value the peer support offered at the centre was hard to match however, proving just how important face-to-face contact is to reduce social isolation and improve wellbeing.

John said: "The main difference the Hawkhead Centre makes for me is getting to speak to other people who are in a similar situation to myself and make friends. We can also turn to the staff for help and advice, and that's been big help too. If the Hawkhead Centre hadn't been there, I think I'd have been pretty depressed and wondering what on earth the next step is going to be."

"I look forward to the day that I go to the centre. It's the best day of the week. Since being back at the centre I've made a stool in the workshop. I was very pleased with how it's turned out, I've been so proud of it. I'm quite amazed that under guidance I can do so much that turns out so well."





# Focus group

**In January 2022, Sight Scotland held a focus group over Zoom on the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on those with sight loss. Amanda, Bilal and Marie are all blind or partially sighted and discussed how the pandemic and public health measures affected them, the things they found the most challenging and what they think could be done differently in future for blind and partially sighted people.**

## **Issues arising in the focus group**

The group began by talking about some of the main challenges they have faced over the past two years and how public health restrictions impacted them. All members of the group spoke about their difficulty to social distance due to their visual impairment and the lack of awareness by members of the public that someone with sight loss would struggle to know whether they were two meters apart from someone else.

**“I wasn’t able to get out and about and when they kept going on about social distancing, you thought, well, how can a person whose is totally blind socially distance?”**

**“The thing that I found most difficult was the inability to social distance. I found that really difficult because I’m partially sighted, and I have a guide dog and they don’t know how to social distance. Koko, my guide dog, would just walk up to the counter at the next available space, and stop there. What I found was people would tut or moan because I was too close to them. They would look at the guide dog and then at me.”**



Going shopping and collecting medication was also cited as a challenge. All members of the focus group were reliant on friends, family and neighbours to get essentials and supermarket delivery slots were often unavailable. When able to go to the shops, there was the additional obstacle of the limit of one person at a time in shops and supermarkets. Two participants had been particularly affected by this as they needed someone to accompany them to help navigate the store, especially with one-way systems and to locate hand sanitising stations, which was made even more difficult when signage was not tactile.

**“When I was doing my shopping you were only allowed one person in the shop at any given time, even when I explained that I needed help as I have a little one and I can’t see labels. I got told they don’t make the rules – it’s one person only, so if I can’t do my shopping, I should get someone else to do it. It left me feeling bad. Trying to keep your independence is very difficult when left treated like that. The rules should have allowed vulnerable people to be assisted.”**

Living in lockdown and not being able to meet people was another issue highlighted by the group. Everyone spoke about the emotional impact of this and how much they missed their family and friends. While everyone kept in touch with loved ones via phone or text, it didn’t replace the benefits of face-to-face contact. One participant was especially affected by this when becoming a new parent, coupled with their eyesight further deteriorating.

**“When I went into hospital, I had to do the labour myself because my partner at the time wasn’t allowed to come in with me. I was also kept in the hospital for four days, so I was having to do it all myself as a first-time parent. I had to go back in by myself for another six days due to an infection, so I didn’t have any support system whatsoever. I wasn’t allowed anyone to come in and see me and my partner wasn’t allowed to see his daughter. Once I got home, I still wasn’t allowed to see my family, I was having to let them meet my daughter from the window – so all the things you have with a newborn baby I missed out on completely.**

**“My eyesight deteriorated further and I completely crumbled. Having to adjust and find everyday things was really hard. There was nothing available and no one could come out to the house.”**

Access to social care support was also impacted by the pandemic. One participant described how funding for their social care support was cut and how this affected his mobility training.

**“I was learning some local routes, luckily I got to complete it, but I wanted to move forward with it [the training] but restrictions stopped me. Mobility officers have had a backlog of people to see so I couldn’t get any further forward with it. I feel I can do it if I put my mind to it, but my point is, I wish I could get social support again because I do need some help to get out and about because I’m not as independent at the moment, and there are still some concerns around travelling.”**

A major issue shared by all participants was the inaccessibility of at-home lateral flow and PCR testing kits. Everyone agreed that the test was near impossible to do alone if you had sight loss and that even with remote assistance through the Be My Eyes app, it was extremely difficult. This included the font size of the information in the testing kit, the clear liquid in the tube, and having to assemble the box to send the PCR swab back in.

**“The test itself is nigh on impossible if you’re trying to do it without assistance. It’s quite fiddly and I can’t see the liquid in the dropper that you have to put the drops in. The liquid is clear – I just can’t see that. Doing the physical swab is fine but it’s**

getting the swab into the liquid is no mean feat, it's a nightmare. Really, really difficult. And, the thing you had to put the liquid in was just too small. Then you have to try to find a circular hole to put the liquid in that you can't see, and you can't see the lines that come up. You're dependant on others, often others aren't there."

"Later on, they brought out Be My Eyes where you've got somebody at the end of the phone to help. They see what's in front of you through your phone camera and they can tell you whether something is a negative, or a positive result. I did try and get support from them to actually physically do the test, but it was impossible – you're trying to hold a phone, hold a swab and they're trying to tell you what to do, how far over you are in terms of putting the liquid in, so it was really difficult. Recording the result on the NHS website was pretty much a nightmare. It wasn't accessible with the screen reader JAWS Zoom Text, which is the magnification software that I use. All over the place."

"Even if were something like braille or audio instructions – that would be good. Or someone in person that could show you."

Thinking about how things could have been made better for blind or partially sighted people and what could be done in the future, the group all agreed that more consideration should be given to people with disabilities. This included implementing the bubble system a lot sooner to allow vulnerable people to get help and support from family and friends and a greater awareness of the needs of blind and partially people.

"Everybody's circumstances are different and trying to do all that on my own I found extremely difficult. I think more understanding and knowledge about different disabilities to allow people to form bubbles sooner because not everybody can do it on their own."

"They could have given more consideration to how social distancing for people with disabilities like mine. They could have thought more about people that had a sight impairment and how they would be able to tell if they were two meters apart."

"I was thinking about signage in shops, for example, signs to say that you're at a hand sanitisation station, signage within your workplace, signs in general. When you're partially sighted or blind it's very difficult to know what signs are saying. I've even heard people saying 'oh, we'll put braille on the signs', but what a lot of people don't understand is that if you didn't know the sign was there in the first place, you wouldn't know to go up to it and check for braille! Even if you can see a sign is there, a lot of people are uncomfortable, and understandably so, to go up to sign to read braille because it makes you look a bit strange. Signage wasn't inclusive of us at all. It's difficult when you're partially sighted or blind and you're living in a sighted world, where you have to fit in. I've noticed it is getting better, but we're not there yet."

# Looking forward

While public health restrictions have loosened, the pandemic continues to impact our daily lives. For many blind and partially sighted people, challenges remain and disabled people continue to be disproportionately impacted by public health measures. There are a number of actions which need to be taken as a matter of urgency by the Scottish Government and public authorities to ensure those with sight loss are not left behind.

## Our policy recommendations

**How we believe we can better support people with sight loss to cope with the challenges of the Covid-19 pandemic and future pandemics:**

### **1. Covid-19 vaccination passport and testing**

An urgent review of the accessibility of the Covid-19 vaccination passport app to ensure it is compatible with screen readers and other digital aids. An increase in assisted community testing should be made available.

### **2. Information in alternative formats**

All public health information should be made available in alternative formats as standard practice. Where this is not possible, there should be a national phone number available to request alternative formats.

### **3. Social distancing**

If social distancing is brought back as a public health measure in future, tactile signs should be introduced in public spaces and hygiene measures such as mask wearing, and hand washing/sanitising should also be introduced

in all public places. Businesses should be strongly encouraged to do the same. We believe more consideration needs to be given blind and partially sighted people being assisted by sighted guides and further promotion and awareness of 'please give me space' social distancing badges.

### **4. Human rights and Covid-19 inquiry**

Action to uphold the rights of disabled people, including those with sight loss, to avoid further human rights breaches. The Scottish Government's Covid-19 inquiry should consider the specific impact of the pandemic on blind and partially sight people and ensure those with lived experience are involved and supported to take part in discussions to identify lessons for the future and recommendations for future pandemics.

### **5. Public awareness of visual impairment**

Ensure the public have greater awareness and understanding of the impacts of vision loss, the different types of eye conditions and how these impact a person's sight.

A high-profile public awareness campaign on visual impairment should be launched with a focus on the following:

- **Visual impairment can be a hidden disability** – not all people living with sight loss have a guide dog or use a white cane. If someone is using a white cane, make sure to give them priority and space.
- **Social distancing is hard if you can't see what's about you** – understand that blind and partially sighted people need you to be responsible in socially distancing around them and recognise their needs.
- **If you can, offer help to people with visual impairment when appropriate** – use clear verbal information to indicate to a person with visual impairment that, while observing social distancing, you can provide appropriate support.

## 6. Loneliness and isolation

Ensure people with sight loss and their families know where to go to for help and support. Increased financial support to charities and organisations who provide support services aimed at reducing

social isolation and loneliness, and encourage more people to become volunteer befrienders.

## 7. Employability support

Scotland's Fair Work Policies and current Fair Work commitments should be informed by timely data that reflects the impact of the Coronavirus pandemic. Further promotion of the Scottish Union of Supported Employment and the Disability Confident employer scheme to encourage businesses and other organisations to recruit and retain disabled people, including those with sight loss. Create specialist apprenticeships, specifically designed for disabled young people, who are at risk of being squeezed further from the labour market.

## 8. Care and rehabilitation

Social care provision must continue to provide physical support and contact which many disabled people rely on. With correct measures in place to prevent infection, rehabilitation and care provision services should continue their support work to prevent disabled people from becoming less independent and more isolated.



# Reference and thanks

**Sight Scotland and Sight Scotland Veterans would like to express our sincere thanks to everyone who took the time to take part in our survey and share their views with us on the impact of the Coronavirus pandemic for people living with sight loss.**

**Sight Scotland and Sight Scotland Veterans lockdown survey, August – September 2020 and August 2021.**

**Sight Scotland and Sight Scotland Veterans You Gov online survey, August 2020.**

**A Fairer Scotland for Disabled People Employment Action Plan – Progress Report:**

Fairer Scotland for disabled people – employment action plan: progress report – year 2 – gov.scot ([www.gov.scot](http://www.gov.scot))

**Scotland’s Labour Market: People, Places and Regions – Statistics from the Annual Population Survey 2020/21:**

Scotland’s Labour Market: People, Places and Regions – Statistics from the Annual Population Survey 2020/21 – gov.scot ([www.gov.scot](http://www.gov.scot))



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Sight Scotland is the operating name of The Royal Blind Asylum and School, Scottish Charity Number SC017167.

Sight Scotland Veterans is the operating name of Scottish War Blinded, charity number SC047192.