

**Royal Blind and Scottish War Blinded response to COVID-19 Committee Call for Evidence**

11 June 2020

**Introduction**

Royal Blind is Scotland's largest visual impairment charity. We support people of all ages - from babies and toddlers at our pre-school playgroup; children and young people at the Royal Blind School (including residential support) and Kidscene after school club; young adults through our residential services and respite care; and older people in our care homes. We also run the Scottish Braille Press. Our sister organisation Scottish War Blinded gives free support to over 1200 to ex-service men and women, no matter if they lost their sight during or after service.

Our vision is for Scotland to be a place where blind and partially sighted people, including those who have other disabilities, are fully included. We work towards this goal for people with visual impairment at every stage of life.

1. **How have groups of people been affected by the virus?**

Approximately 180,000 people in Scotland live with an uncorrectable sight condition that has a significant impact on their day to day to life. Blind and partially sighted people have been profoundly and disproportionately affected by the impact of coronavirus, and Royal Blind is deeply concerned that this has had serious consequences for their fundamental human rights.

The impact of the measures to reduce incidence have left them more isolated, with less support and in some instances struggling even for basic necessities like food.

Despite significant efforts by charities and services to find innovative ways to continue to provide support, social distancing means many have been unable to leave their homes or anxious about doing so. They have not been able to access services and support which have been vital to their everyday life. While people have been encouraged to leave their homes for walk and exercise, this has been hugely challenging for people living with visual impairment, who are being asked to maintain social distancing when they can’t see who is around them. Many rely on sighted guides, but if guides are from outwith their household they have not been able to receive this support and so have been unable to leave their home.

During the pandemic, blind and partially sighted people have not been designated as a vulnerable group. Royal Blind believes this decision has been detrimental to people with visual impairment and impacted on their human rights. Blind and partially sighted people weren’t prioritised for supermarket deliveries, and so were suddenly excluded from services they relied on for basic provisions. While some progress has been made with some retailers on this situation, we know a number of blind and partially sighted people have relied on food parcels or had to ration food during the pandemic. We understand the clinical basis for prioritising vulnerable groups in the early stages of the pandemic. However, as the Scottish Government’s stated strategy has been protecting against both direct and indirect harms caused by Covid-19, we believe the subsequent failure to designate people with visual impairment as vulnerable is clear failure of policy which has caused avoidable harms to a particularly vulnerable group.

People living with visual impairment have been affected by the impact on services which provide them with essential support. As a provider of education, care and employment for blind and partially sighted people we are keenly aware of the impact this has had on their lives. The Royal Blind School has been closed since lockdown, and while we have delivered online learning at home pupils have not had the same access to specialist teaching and support which is vital for their education and independent living skills. While we have kept families in touch online with young people and young adults with complex needs at our residential services, visits have not been possible, which places an emotional burden both on the service users and family members. Visits have also not been possible to our two residential nursing homes for older people with sight loss. Staff across these setting have worked incredibly in challenging circumstances both to keep residents well and help them use online resources to keep in touch with family.

Scottish War Blinded’s normal programme of outreach support, social activities and home visits has also been suspended, reverting instead to telephone support and a range of creative ways, often using technology, to minimise the social isolation which these service users often experience, intensified by the pandemic.

1. **Which groups have been disproportionately affected by the virus and the response to it?**

People living with visual impairment have been significantly and disproportionately affected by the virus and the response to it. While we all understand how necessary the severe restrictions to everyday life have been to reduce infection, we are deeply concerned that the greater impact these restrictions have had for blind and partially sighted people has not been fully understood or prepared for.

We have surveyed people with visual impairment on the challenges they have faced and the uncertainty which remains over how they will be affected by restrictions being eased. These are some of the issues they have highlighted.

**Social distancing**

Social distancing is integral to the measures to reduce spread of the virus but presents huge problems for people who are blind or partially sighted who are unable to tell if they are two metres away from another person. The introduction of queues to access premises and social distancing measures within them have been impossible for many people with visual impairment to negotiate who can’t see markers or signs. As restrictions are eased this actually threatens to make the situation worse for blind and partially sighted people. With people leaving their homes more often and streets getting busier, this actually can make it even more difficult for people with visual impairment because of the challenges they face with social distancing.

A number of councils have indicated they wish to introduce more ‘pop-up’ cycle lanes and a number of blind and partially sighted people have told us of how they have had near-misses with cyclists who they couldn’t hear coming and who were weren’t aware of or, in a few instances, hadn’t taken account of their visual impairment.

**Shopping**

"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 Haylott, Royal Blind School parent

Social distancing measures in a variety of settings have already shown how difficult or impossible they can be for blind and partially sighted people to manage. For people with visual impairment who can shop, social distancing markers on floors and the introduction of one-way routes around supermarkets cannot easily be navigated by either long cane or guide dog users. In addition, because people with visual impairment have not been designated by government within the ‘vulnerable’ group during the pandemic they have not been prioritised for food deliveries by many supermarkets and have not been able to access delivery services they have previously relied on.

**Public transport**

“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

Access to public transport is crucial for very many blind and partially sighted people, but measures which are being put in place as we emerge from lockdown mean using public transport will be harder for them. Currently people with visual impairment often rely on being guided by staff when they get to a station. They won’t be able to observe distance markers on services.

**Schools and workplaces**

“If we as VI students go back to school, how would we social distance safely?”

Summer, school pupil in Glasgow

Pupils with visual impairment returning to school will face additional challenges to fully sighted pupils, as their reliance on tactile signs and navigation by touch raises issues around their risk of exposure to the virus. They won’t be able to follow social distancing in the same way as other pupils. This situation is even more difficult due to the reduction in specialist support available to some pupils.

Similar challenges will be faced by blind and partially sighted employees in workplaces. While some will be able to work from home, this in itself can create challenges around increased risk of isolation.

**Accessible information**

Throughout the pandemic there have been problems for blind and partially sighted people receiving information about the coronavirus response. For example, concerns have been raised with us in regard to the time it took for the letters from the Prime Minister and First Minister to households to be available in accessible formats, including online.

1. **Have there been specific equality or human rights impacts on groups of people as a response to the virus?**

There have been specific human rights impacts for blind and partially sighted people resulting the response to the virus, and we believe fundamental rights set out in the United Nations Convention on the Rights for People with Disabilities (UNCPRD) are not being observed.

We understand that Covid-19 presents unprecedented and complex challenges and that everyone is affected by the pandemic. However, we believe key human rights issues for people living with visual impairment have been significantly affected and more can and should be done to prevent the pandemic increasing social inequalities. We are keenly aware that many people living with other disabilities, including those living with other sensory impairments, have been affected in the same way.

Many provisions set out in the UNCPRD have not been adhered to during the pandemic in a range of circumstances and settings, and we would seek to highlight three in particular:

**Accessibility**

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. We have set out how many premises, public areas and public transport are now not accessible to blind and partially sighted people, and how the specific challenges they face with social distancing have not been recognised and accounted for adequately.

**Adequate standard of living and social protection**

Article 28 requires that states recognise the right of disabled people to an adequate standard of living for themselves and their families, including adequate food, clothing and housing, and to the continuous improvement of living conditions. We have set out how many blind and partially sighted people have struggled to access basic provisions included during the pandemic, and 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 disability to participate fully and equally in the community, education and all aspects of life. We recognise that participation rights have been affected for many groups of people during the pandemic. However, there have been distinct and disproportionate barriers to participation for blind and partially sighted people, and there is a risk there will be greater inequalities in relation to participation as we embark on the route map from lockdown. As a result of social distancing, people with visual impairment will face additional barriers to participating in education, employment and community life. These barriers will be exacerbated if additional measures are not introduced to help people with visual impairment maintain social distancing, for example tactile markers to define 2 meter spaces, awareness campaigns on visual impairment and social distancing and measures to allow support from sighted guides.

1. **What do the Scottish Government and public authorities (e.g. local authorities, health boards etc.) need to change or improve:**
* **as a matter of urgency?**
* **in the medium to long term?**

There are number of actions which need to be taken as a matter of urgency by the Scottish Government and public authorities to prevent detriment to the rights of blind and partially sighted people during the pandemic.

**Accessibility**

Guidance is required for organisations which sets out how they can reduce accessibility barriers for disabled people during the pandemic and makes clear their obligation to do so. In response to questions on guidance to providers on accessibility issues, the Scottish Government has cited the Equality Act 2010, which places a duty on service providers to make reasonable adjustments to ensure that a disabled person has, as far as is reasonable, the same access as a non-disabled person. The Scottish Government states that service providers are expected to adapt these adjustments in light of the current COVID-19 situation. However, we are concerned that organisations are not making the additional reasonable adjustments which are required to ensure access and participation for disabled people can continue. We understand the complex and unprecedented context the pandemic presents, but we believe much more can be done to reduce accessibility barriers for blind and partially sighted people at this time. It is not enough to expect providers to abide by equalities legislation, but action is required to ensure they do. Additionally, it is vital that all information for the public on Covid-19 are available in accessible formats at time of publication.

**Transport and getting around**

Access to public transport is crucial for very many blind and partially sighted people, but measures which are being put in place as we emerge from lockdown mean using public transport will be harder for them. They will not be able to observe distance markers on services. Currently people with visual impairment often rely on being guided by staff when they get to a station. Clarity is required on what alternative arrangements will be made.

There is considerable anxiety among many blind and partially sighted people about how new temporary cycle lanes this will affect them as pedestrians. While we would expect the great majority of cyclists will be responsible to allow for “safe walking” and respect the needs and safety of pedestrians, this cannot be guaranteed in every instance. Shared spaces schemes in urban centres have resulted in safety concerns from blind and partially sighted people. We have heard of a number of instances of people with visual impairment who have had negative experiences as pedestrians as a result of cyclists. People who have very little or no vision cannot identify where cycle lanes are and if they are unable to hear a cyclist approaching this increases risk. Any scheme to introduce must be the subject of comprehensive consultation with blind and partially sighted people and local disability groups.

**Access to supermarkets**

Royal Blind and other organisations are calling on supermarkets as a matter of urgency to allow anyone at increased risk from COVID-19 or with a disability under the Equalities Act, of any age, and their carer/s priority access to home deliveries and stores, if they need it. This should be consistent across the industry and clearly communicated to all customers, not just relying on online communications and with new customers not excluded from registering.The Scottish Government should facilitate discussion between supermarkets and groups and individuals representing those affected to ensure a coherent and effective resolution to this problem.

**Care and rehabilitation**

Social care provision must continue, and many disabled people rely on physical support and contact. With measures put in place to prevent infection, including the appropriate equipment, it will be vital for rehabilitation and care provision services which have been affected to resume. Where some visits by staff providing support have been stopped, these will need to resume with the appropriate safeguards, or disabled people will become less independent and more isolated. We believe further consideration needs to be given to the issue of blind and partially sighted people being assisted by sighted guides.

**Public awareness campaign**

We believe there needs to be a high-profile public awareness campaign on visual impairment and social distancing. We suggest three key messages for this campaign:

* **It’s hard to socially distance 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.
* **Visual impairment can be an invisible disability** – not all people living with sight loss have a guide dog or use a white cane.
* **If you can, offer help to people with visual impairment while social distancing when appropriate** – use clear verbal information to indicate to a person with visual impairment that, while observing social distancing, you can provide appropriate support.

We believe it is important for an awareness campaign with these or similar messages to be developed in collaboration with sight loss charities, including directly with people with visual impairment.

There are other key areas of concern for people with visual impairment where we believe longer term action will be required to prevent the impacts of the pandemic resulting in growing inequalities.

**Education**

The lockdown has put particular pressure on children with additional support needs and their families, and they will also face specific accessibility issues when they return to school due to the requirement for social distancing.

There has been a great deal of discussion on how the closure of schools during the lockdown has affected pupils, and blind and partially sighted pupils already faced an attainment gap compared to their fully sighted peers. We have previously expressed concerns over the impact of cuts to additional support needs budgets and reduction in numbers of specialist teachers for vision impairment at a time when the number of pupils living with visual impairment has been increasing significantly. We believe there needs to be careful monitoring on any disproportionate impact on pupils with additional support needs as a result of missed schooling and the measures which schools have introduced. We also believe the impact of the pandemic further strengthens the pressing case for better access to specialist support.

**Employment**

The employment crisis which will result from the pandemic threatens to widen the employability gap for disabled people. Working age people who are blind or partially sighted are twice as likely not to be in paid employment as people who are not living with disabilities. Longer periods of absence from the workplace due to the pandemic risks locking disabled people into a cycle of low economic inactivity. 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.

It is vital the Scottish Government’s Coronavirus working group on employability considers how more specialist employability support services can be made available for people with visual impairment. when compared to non-disabled people. There is also a need for employment initiatives, such as specialist apprenticeships, specifically designed for disabled young people, who are at risk of being squeezed further from the labour market.