

Including Volunteers With Vision Impairment

A guide on how to include volunteers with sight loss and ensure they have a positive experience within your organisation.



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About Sight Scotland and Sight Scotland Veterans

Our mission is to reach everyone in Scotland with sight loss – where and when they need us.

Sight Scotland provides specialist care, education and support that empowers people affected by sight loss in Scotland, and their families and carers. Sight Scotland campaigns for equal opportunities for people with sight loss to participate fully in society. The charity also provides supported employment, and funds research into cures and treatments for blindness and sight loss.

Sight Scotland Veterans works across Scotland to support ex-service personnel affected by sight loss. The charity supports veterans in regaining their confidence, restoring their independence, and making new connections. Sight Scotland Veterans has two established activity centres, and its experienced outreach and rehabilitation teams offer home visits to help veterans adjust to living with sight loss and support veterans by giving advice on low vision equipment.





Michael's Top Tips

Michael provides the perspective of a volunteer with visual impairment. He is an art tutor within Sight Scotland Veterans' Hawkhead Centre in Paisley, where he helps veterans with sight loss to express themselves through a range of artistic skills. He was a finalist in the Charity Champions category of the Scottish Charity Awards 2020.

- You may be surprised by how much I can do for myself. I do not always need help and I try to be as independent as possible. If I look like I am struggling with a task such as getting around, locating objects, or making a cup of tea please ask me first before jumping in to help.
- Contrary to popular belief, most vision impaired people are not completely blind. I will use my residual vision to the best of my abilities to perform my duties and engage with colleagues. This can be hard work for me though and can lead to fatigue towards the end of the day.
- I can mistake people during very brief encounters. Please do not take offence if I mistake you for someone else or do not notice you at all. To counter this, say things like "Good morning Michael, it's Debbie here".
- Please let me know who you are when you are approaching me, and then tell me when you are leaving me (even if you are just popping out of the room for a minute or two).
- When you want to talk to me in the company of others, please just mention your name so that I know who and where you are.

- Make introductions when someone joins our conversation, so that I know they are there and can talk to them.
- Though my vision is limited, I will most likely be able to hear you without any bother. Unless I ask you to, there is no need to speak particularly loudly or slowly.
- When you talk to me, I may have trouble with keeping eye contact or facing you. You might also find that I present fewer facial expressions and other non-verbal responses than you are used to. Please be assured that I am engaged in the conversation.
- When performing a visually taxing task such as reading, typing, or note-taking, I need to focus all my energy on the work. If you want to talk with me then please do but allow me a moment to reacclimatise my vision to my environment.
- When navigating the workspace with or without a mobility aid, I may find it difficult to judge the distance between people and objects.
- I may have a support worker to assist me in settling into my new volunteering role. If you have a question to ask, please speak to me directly rather than addressing the support worker. They are not my P.A.
- I am keen to fit in and socialise with my fellow colleagues. During conversations however, I may have difficulty in making and keeping eye contact. If I am finding it difficult to chime-in during a conversation, please do not leave me out.
- If you are giving me something, please communicate with me and tell me where it is. For example, “your coffee is on the table, near your right hand”. Please do not grab my hand and put something in it, as this can be unsettling.
- Large groups and crowded rooms can be overwhelming to me, as can other noisy environments such as busy roads and rooms with loud music.
- Ask me about my hobbies. We might have something in common. People with a visual impairment are not limited to reading Braille or listening to talking books for fun. There are vision impaired movie buffs, gamers, crafters, painters, athletes etc.



Sharon's Top Tips



Sharon gives the perspective of an expert staff member. She is a qualified Rehabilitation Officer and is part of the Outreach Rehabilitation Team at Sight Scotland Veterans, and has previously worked at Sight Scotland's Royal Blind School. During a long career of working in the field of vision impairment, she has gained experience of assisting people with sight loss to thrive and live their fullest lives. She also happens to be Michael's mum!

- Take time to talk to and get to know your volunteer. Seek to gain a better understanding of their individual level of sight, and how this impacts their role as a volunteer. Ask proactively if there is anything they might find useful to carry out their role and get the most from volunteering. For example, they may need low vision equipment or software to work with a computer. Be prepared to discuss helpful adaptations to not just the workplace but also the volunteer's role if necessary.
- Ensure your volunteer can have any written information and resources in their preferred format. For example, they may ask you to print their training handouts or volunteer expenses form using an accessible font and contrast.
- Everyone's experience of sight loss is different. Even if two people have the exact same eye condition, they will not have the same level of useful vision. Do not assume that what works well for one volunteer will be the same for another.
- Mobility independence is vital as most people with vision impairment still have some level of useful vision. Even though this vision can be limited, being able to see shape and form may allow the volunteer to navigate the workplace independently.
- Consider, and speak to your volunteer about contrast and lighting. These can be essential factors and might include a large font keyboard with contrasting letters and numbers at their workstation, or better lighting on the stairs to assist with mobility, for example.
- Getting to know the workplace is vital for any volunteer and might require a little more time and planning for someone with sight loss. Is there a suitable staff member or fellow volunteer who can act as a buddy? Allow time for your volunteer to gain a good understanding of layout, workspace, toilets, kitchen facilities, etc. and then phase out the buddy system when appropriate.

- Ensure your colleagues and others visiting your organisation (including tradespeople) are aware of the importance of not leaving things where they do not usually belong.
 - An old computer at the side of the corridor, an unattended ladder or toolbox, or even an office chair that has been temporarily pushed back when you go to make a coffee can be a serious hazard.
 - Health and safety aside, there are other good reasons to try to keep things in the place your volunteer might expect to quickly locate them. Is there a stapler that normally “lives” beside the printer but occasionally ends up on someone’s desk? Do you normally keep the milk on a shelf in the fridge door, but sometimes spot it hiding behind the sugar? Your volunteer might find these situations even more frustrating than you do!
- If your volunteer is a guide dog user, you should always contact Guide Dogs and speak to a GDMI (guide dog mobility instructor) for advice on how best to support a guide dog for things like comfort space and toilet area.
- Lunchtime is an important social break. Is your volunteer regularly eating a homemade sandwich at their desk whilst staff and other volunteers pop out together? Consider arranging sighted guide training for some of your colleagues, this may allow the volunteer to fully join in with lunchtime and other social situations.
- Sim specs are wearable glasses that can simulate different types of vision impairment. These are useful for training and awareness raising. They can give sighted colleagues within your organisation an appreciation of some of the challenges experienced by people with varying levels of sight loss.
- Your volunteer may be an independent traveller using a long cane or guide dog but take time to be aware of their travel commitments, route etc. There are lots of reasons why your volunteer might arrive having had a difficult journey, for example: a detoured bus, guide dog related problems, a delayed train, etc. What might be a small setback to a sighted person can be much more problematic for someone with vision impairment. Be understanding and flexible in your approach if your volunteer is running late and consider calling them if something seems unusual.
- Enjoy having volunteers with vision impairment on your team, and all the skills, knowledge and experience they bring with them.

For further information on vision impairment or sighted guide training for staff, contact Sight Scotland or Sight Scotland Veterans.

