



**Sight
Scotland**

iSight

February 2024 | sightscotland.org.uk



Giving everyone the best start



Dear Supporter

We know that every person is more than meets the eye. That is why we want to show people what life with sight loss can look like when you have the right support. This iSight magazine tells stories reflecting this, of children lighting up with a tactile language, of football captains travelling across the UK, and of musicians planning their first live gig.

Your support means we are there when sight loss impacts people's lives. This is crucial support. In 2023, the number of calls to our Support Line increased by 68 per cent. Thanks to donations like yours, we are able to provide this helpline five days a week to people like Debbi, who called us about her two-year-old daughter.

Your support also means change is happening across Scotland. You'll read about Freya and how she's now talking and singing after specialist support from the Royal Blind School. On page 12, you can read about our campaign for safer railway stations after Sam got stranded dangerously close to the platform edge. You may have seen our campaign for a new eye hospital in the news: you can read an update on page 18.

Thank you for helping us be there for everyone living with sight loss in Scotland, where and when they need us.

Davina Shiell

Director of Marketing, Communications and Engagement



Sight Scotland Support Line

Talk to us on **0800 024 8973**

Open 9am to 5pm, Monday to Friday

Did you know?

Electric scooters in York are being fitted with a new acoustic alert system, thanks to a trial organised by the North Yorkshire Sight Loss Council. Now, everyone can hear these e-scooters coming! You can read about our new Scottish Sight Loss Councils on page 20.

iSight in alternative formats To receive iSight in large print, braille or audio CD please contact us on 0131 229 1456 or email fundraising@sightscotland.org.uk

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

Address: Sight Scotland, 2A Robertson Avenue, Edinburgh EH11 1PZ



A marathon for a friend

Kalen says running a marathon gave him the best feeling in the world – and he'll be back in 2024.

"You feel incredible afterward. Your endorphins are going crazy, and you just feel class," Kalen says.

The 21-year-old lives in Nethy Bridge, north of the Cairngorms. He ran the 2023 Edinburgh Marathon to raise money for Sight Scotland.

Kalen says: "My mate took really ill and became visually impaired, and I thought, what can I do to help people in his situation and help people who are going through a tough time?"

"I thought, doing a marathon would be the thing. It's hard enough to give my friends and people we know a reason to donate, and it means we're raising money for a charity that's helping people."

And raise money he did – through sharing his fundraising appeal with friends, family and his community, Kalen raised more than £1,700 for Sight Scotland's services. Thank you Kalen!

When the big day came, the crowds gave him extra motivation.

“

My mate took really ill and became visually impaired, and I thought, what can I do to help people in his situation.”

"I couldn't believe how many thousands of people were cheering all along the route from Musselburgh to Edinburgh. If you're not a professional athlete, you wouldn't experience that anywhere else. They don't know your name, but they're still cheering."

Kalen is already itching for the 2024 Edinburgh Marathon on Sunday 26 May.

"I just wanted to finish in 2023, but this year, I really want to go for a good time."

Can you help?

Set yourself a target

Could you do a challenge event in 2024? Visit our website to book a free fundraising place in a 2024 marathon at sightscotland.org.uk/get-involved/fundraise-us/find-challenge-event



Thank you for your support!

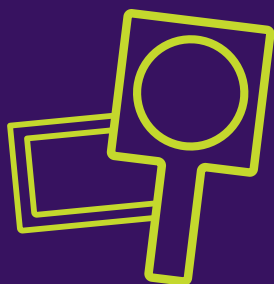
Your support throughout 2023 helped us make sure people didn't need to face sight loss alone. Across our services from the Royal Blind School and Forward Vision, to our Community service, you helped provide care, equipment and support to people with visual impairment.

**Thank
you!**

Your donations funded extra large plasma TV screens, meaning that Royal Blind School pupils can watch and learn on these large devices.



You helped fund 200 magnifiers and 22 lamps for people struggling with their sight. This is helping people to read again, and continue doing the things they love.



Your support helped young adults with vision impairment and additional complex needs to go on a holiday trip to Homelands in Fife.



Our Support Line team is answering over 2,100 calls each year and helping support people with visual impairment.



We're now running social meet-ups and support groups across the Central Belt for people with visual impairment to get involved in.



Music and song inspire Freya to start speaking

Freya is loving a special method of communication at the Royal Blind School – and she's learning in leaps and bounds!



Freya, who was born very prematurely, has severe vision impairment. She's now in Primary 2 at the Royal Blind School. Freya's parents Eilidh and Keir have been amazed at Freya's progress.

"There has been such a big change in Freya since she started, and she is communicating so much more now.

"It is almost unbelievable. We tried so hard to get her to communicate before school, but all she could really say was 'Mum' or 'Dad'. But now, her speaking has really taken off.

“

The signing she does at the school has also made a big difference.”



Eilidh says: "The signing she does at the school has also made a big difference. She does a double fist pump for school every morning with a huge smile on her face."

Freya has been learning 'on-body' signing at the Royal Blind School. On-body signing is communicating with each other through touch. It involves the gentle pressing of a sign on your own, or another person's, hand, arm, leg or cheek. On-body signing helps develop a young person's natural gestures and helps them communicate better with the world around them.

Freya's class teacher, Louise Buggy, says Freya has impressed everyone since her first day.

Louise adds: "She loves the on-body sign system that we use. On day one, she was reaching



out for our hands, showing that she wanted to join in and connect and interact.

“She then started to guide our hands, showing that she understood what the signs were meaning, as we were speaking and singing. Then she started signing for herself.

“Incredibly, just a short time after this, she started to say the key words in sentences or songs; her first new word was school. She then started to learn new key words every couple of days, based on our predictable routines. To see the progression in this little girl is just astounding.”

Eilidh says Freya’s movement has dramatically increased since she started at the Royal Blind School too:

“We could not have imagined back then how much she would have progressed, and that she would now be communicating with us and crawling and standing. We wanted to give Freya the best possible start in life, and the best possible education, and we know the Royal Blind School is doing exactly this.”



Great friends meeting every week

New friends can inspire us and bring special insights to our lives. Pals Freda and Tamas met through Sight Scotland's volunteer befriending programme a year ago, and their friendship has been life changing.

Tamas is a Sight Scotland befriender and visits Freda at her home in Musselburgh. The pair go shopping together, go for a walk, or have a coffee and a chat.

Tama, aged 31, says he is humbled by Freda.

"I started volunteering at the beginning of January 2023 and have found it just so rewarding. Freda and I have built up a strong friendship and we both get a lot out of the experience; I find it very humbling. I know I am really helping her, but in many ways, she is helping me just as much."

Freda, 67 years old, reached out to Sight Scotland when she realised she needed some help. She has been blind since her birth due to being born very prematurely. As a positive and independent person, Freda does all her own cooking and cleaning and receives no help with the upkeep of her house. But after giving up her last guide dog, Freda contacted Sight Scotland for some help.

“

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Can you help?

What is a befriender?

A volunteer befriender is someone who provides trained support and companionship to a lonely or emotionally distressed person. Befriending is proven to reduce the feeling of seclusion and self-isolation while increasing self-esteem and confidence.



Could you help?

Sight Scotland is looking for more befrienders. If you are interested in becoming a befriender, please visit sightscotland.org.uk/volunteer or email people@sightscotland.org.uk or call 0131 446 3154.

“
As a blind person, going out
and about alone, even with
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and harder...”

Freda says: “As a blind person, going out and about alone, even with a guide dog, is getting harder and harder with all the street furniture, bins, new bus stops, and low kerbs. I just don’t want to do it anymore. That is why I got in touch with Sight Scotland, I realised I needed help with going out.”

Tamas says Freda has helped him view life in a new way.

“She is a real inspiration, and so knowledgeable on many subjects. She has made me appreciate everything I have and has made me listen to the beauty we hear every day around us.”

Tamas adds: “If anyone is considering becoming a volunteer befriender, my advice would be: just go for it, it really is one of the most rewarding things I have ever done. You are making such a difference to a person’s life; it is incredible to have the ability to do this for someone.”



Making train stations safer is so important

New train stations can be hard to navigate – but imagine not being able to tell where the edge of the platform is!

That's what happened to Sam Gough, a former Royal Blind School pupil on her way to a sports event. The 20-year-old took a train from Edinburgh to Doncaster. Sam had booked ahead for assistance to meet her when she got off the train and to guide her to the exit.

But the request hadn't reached Doncaster station. No one from the station was there to meet her.

When Sam stepped off the train, she couldn't feel any tactile paving on the ground, indicating a platform edge was nearby. These raised indicators provide crucial information to people with visual impairment, highlighting dangerous areas.

Unsure whether she was walking towards a platform edge or towards the exit, Sam wasn't sure which way to turn.

"Fast trains were screaming past with the wind hitting me and despite screaming on the platform for help, no one heard," she said.

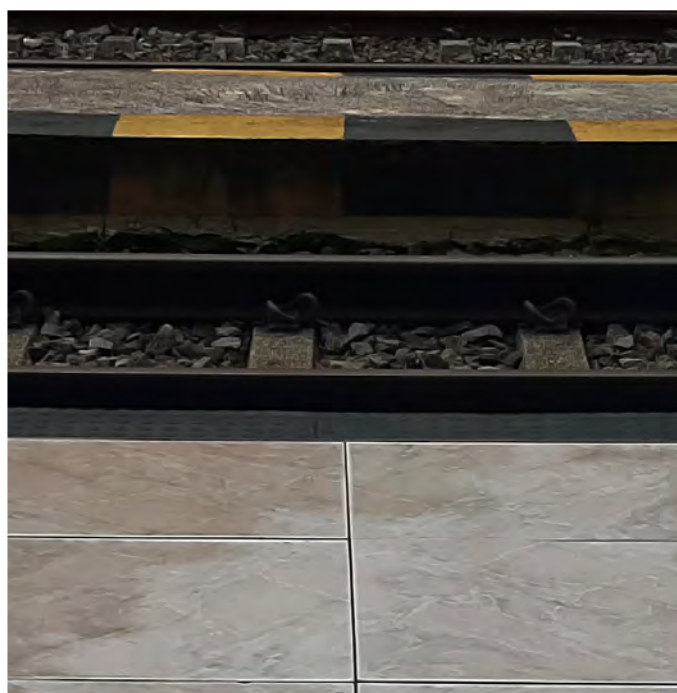
"People have died falling on the tracks before and I thought it was about to happen to me. It was a nightmare, a really horrendous situation to be in."

Sam called her Mum in Scotland, who phoned the police. A train guard saw she was in distress and got off a train to alert station staff. Sam, who lives in Midlothian, captains England's blind football team and has achieved so much as an athlete and advocate already. But she says the experience has knocked her confidence.

"This is the most extreme situation I have faced on the train. Sports people need to use the rail network all the time to get to training and events. There is a real issue here about accessibility and fairness."



Tactile paving, indicating platform edge



A platform with no tactile pavement

Demanding action

We are shocked by Sam's experience and challenged LNER on this issue.

We called for urgent action to improve accessibility and safety for visually impaired passengers. We're now involved in LNER's Accessibility Forum and we're working together to put forward ideas on how to make train travel a better experience.

Network Rail has pledged to work with Scotrail to install tactile paving on all remaining rail platforms in Scotland by the end of 2023 – but that deadline has now passed and we want to see this upgraded, now!

There is no time to waste. Experiences like Sam's should never have happened in the first place, and should never happen again.

Help us take action by signing a letter to the Minister for Transport that calls for tactile paving to be installed on all rail platforms, now! Visit: sightscotland.eaction.org.uk/tactile-paving-now

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Debbi's story

Discovering that your child has visual impairment can be heartbreaking for parents and can cause a whirlwind of emotions, including helplessness and fear.

Sofie was only eight weeks old when her parents, Debbi and William, began to notice there was a problem with her eyes.

'Emotional support is just so important'

Debbi explains: "This was such a scary and heartbreaking time, there is so much uncertainty and neither of us really knew what to do. It was devastating when the consultant told us Sofie has visual impairment, for a little girl to be given this life-changing news at such a young age was very hard to take.

"Sofie was just your typical happy baby so we couldn't understand why this was happening to her."

Information overload

Debbi says: "The amount of information we were given was very overwhelming, and it was all verbal which made it harder to understand. It felt like we had to become experts in Sofie's condition and sight loss in general to be well informed."

“

It was devastating when the consultant told us Sofie has visual impairment, for a little girl to be given this life-changing news at such a young age was very hard to take.”



Vital support

Sofie is now two, and Debbi says Sight Scotland's support has been invaluable.

"Sight Scotland has been great with us; the charity has a real community and family feel.

"The emotional support has been just so important, just having someone to talk to, who understands what we are going through, has been invaluable. It honestly feels like having another family member who is on hand whenever we need them."

Debbi adds: "Whether it is signposting, listening, supporting or the policy group giving us a voice, they are always there to answer our questions and fill in the gaps. It would have made such a massive difference if this help was there from the start."

Debbi and William love spending time with Sofie and are excited for her future.

Debbi says: "Ninety percent of the time, we don't notice her vision impairment. She is just your typical two-year-old: being happy, silly, and having tantrums.

"She brings so much joy to our lives."



Drummer takes the stage in Edinburgh

Feeling the beat in his bones, Angus absolutely adores playing drums.

Now, the former Royal Blind School pupil is achieving his dreams, thanks to independent living skills he has learnt through Sight Scotland.

Angus, 19, was born with a visual impairment and frequently travels independently from East Lothian to Edinburgh to play in a punk rock band – and he's excited about their first live gig.

"Playing live in a band has been an ambition of mine for the past nine years," Angus says.

"In 2014, I was going to a youth club for blind people, and there was a drum kit in the hall which was quite battered. I sat down and started learning to play it. I did a lot of self-taught learning, and soon began lessons.

"I love playing drums. It's loud and you can feel the beat of it – and it's a really good feeling".

Angus went to Ross High, a mainstream school, four days a week, and attended sessions at the Royal Blind School on Tuesdays. At the Royal Blind School, Angus learned music theory, in addition to IT skills, personal finance, and independent living skills such as cooking and mobility.

Since finishing school, Angus has been working with Sight Scotland's mobility team on increasing his independence, doing things like taking public transport.

“

In sixth year, I got an 'A' in Advanced Higher Music, and I feel without the Royal Blind School's help teaching me music theory with braille, I would not have achieved that.”





Now, Angus is taking buses to Pirate Studios in Edinburgh for band practice every Tuesday.

“We have a lead, a rhythm and a bass guitarist, and I’m on drums. Our band is called ‘Shot Lock’ and we play metal punk rock. We’re writing our own music, but we also play songs by Slipknot, Rage Against the Machine, Nirvana and Silverchair.

“We just played our first gig on the on 18 January at Bannerman’s Bar in Edinburgh.”

In addition to drums, Angus is keen to continue improving his public speaking. He was a keynote speaker at Sight Scotland’s 230th-anniversary celebration in October and delighted 120 guests with stories and jokes.

Angus says: “I absolutely loved speaking at the event. I met loads of new people and spoke with many people I know. I really enjoyed it.”

Celebrating 230 years of support for people with visual impairment

Since 1783, our charity has supported people impacted by vision impairment, providing education, care, and employment.

We were delighted to celebrate this milestone with two events. During the summer, His Grace the Duke of Buccleuch – whose family has been involved in Sight Scotland since we were founded 230 years ago – kindly hosted a wonderful afternoon tea at his Bowhill House estate in the Borders. People with visual impairment who use our services, supporters, volunteers and staff all greatly enjoyed the day. His Grace the Duke has recently stepped down from being the President of our charity after 15 years of dedicated support to focus on his health and family. We warmly wish the Duke (pictured on the opposite page wearing a brown suit and speaking with service users) all the best and would like to thank him for his long-standing support of our charity.

In October, we invited friends and beneficiaries of Sight Scotland to a celebratory event at the Grassmarket Community Centre, showcasing support provided for people with a vision impairment throughout the last two centuries.





Get behind our campaign for a new Eye Hospital!

You can sign our petition for a new Eye Hospital for Edinburgh and the Lothians.

The Princess Alexandra Eye Pavilion is managed by NHS Lothian, and thousands of people rely on it in Edinburgh, the Lothians, and the Borders.

The hospital is used to diagnose and treat many eye problems, such as glaucoma, cataracts, and treatments for retinal vein occlusion.

Desperate need for a new building

However, the hospital building is now more than 55 years old and falling into disrepair!

Ten years ago, in 2014, the Scottish Government declared that the building was not fit for its purpose. A new eye building was promised in

2018, and assurances were given by former First Minister Nicola Sturgeon in 2021. But still, funding has not been committed to it.

The refusal to fund a new hospital is denying people access to good quality eye healthcare. It's time for a new eye hospital for Edinburgh, and for everyone in the Lothians and the Borders.

Lorna's experience

Every three months, Lorna visits the Eye Pavilion. She has a condition called keratoconus and has had surgeries for glaucoma and cataracts.



Lorna says: “The outpatient facilities are so cramped and dated it is uncomfortable to visit, especially when you are a regular visitor like me. If the shower floods, the two women’s toilets in the surgical ward are closed and you are forced to go to the other end of the building. There is no air conditioning, so it gets unbearably hot in the summer. There is an awful lot of glass, causing so much glare. Glare is a real problem for many people with vision impairment, who are very sensitive to light.

“I have a lot more treatments in the pipeline, and it would be amazing to think I could go to a facility where I would feel comfortable, instead of vulnerable and full of dread.”

Iain’s experience

Iain Young is an RAF veteran from East Lothian who developed suspected Stargardt disease in his 50s, causing flashing lights and holes in his vision.

“As a regular visitor to the eye hospital, I know first-hand how much we need an upgrade,” Iain says.

“Quite simply, the building has passed its sell-by date: the facilities are grim, there is always some kind of problem every time you visit, whether it’s flooding or leaks.

“It is so traumatic and difficult losing your sight: you are in such a vulnerable and emotional state that you deserve to be looked after well. Currently, the building just adds to your stress levels and feelings of angst.”

**Take
action!**

You can sign our petition

It is time for a new eye hospital. We are encouraging the Scottish Government to commit funds to a new facility, and we need your help.

Please sign our online petition. It only takes two minutes and could help us make a great difference for people like Lorna and Iain, and anyone else in Edinburgh, the Lothians or the Borders who needs to visit the eye hospital.



Visit: sightscotland.eaction.org.uk/NewEyeHospital

New Sight Loss Councils seeking participants who want to make a difference

Our new Sight Loss Councils are keen to involve people with vision impairment who have ideas about improving accessibility.



Funded by:



Led by blind and partially sighted people, Sight Loss Councils are groups where members can share and use their own lived experiences to tackle local and national issues and help improve the accessibility of services.

The Sight Loss Councils are being launched by Sight Scotland, Sight Scotland Veterans and Visibility Scotland, in partnership with the Thomas Pocklington Trust. We are so excited to be running this initiative, in partnership with other excellent organisations who feel as strongly about making a real difference as we do.

“
Sight Loss Councils are a fantastic opportunity to amplify the voice of those with lived experience in Scotland, making vision loss the priority it needs to be.”

- Craig Spalding, Chief Executive for Sight Scotland and Sight Scotland Veterans

There are currently 23 Sight Loss Councils (SLCs) across England, but these are the first SLCs in Scotland.

Each SLC will be made up of a small group of volunteers with visual impairment who will meet monthly to discuss accessibility priorities and plan projects in their regions. These priorities include transport and streets being accessible, so everyone can travel independently and safely. Sight Loss Council members will also work to increase the accessibility of healthcare, shopping, museums, and sports facilities, depending on the local area.

Get involved

Do you have visual impairment and would you like to make a difference? We would love to hear from you - please email Callum.Lancashire@sightscotland.org.uk to register your interest, and our facilitator will be in touch with more information.

Be in with a chance to win £500!



**Help us ensure no one
faces sight loss alone.
Enter our raffle today.**



← To enter, scan the QR code, or visit
sightscotland.org.uk/raffle
Draw date: Friday 29 March.



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Visit bequeathed.org/sightscotland to start your free Will for Good online



**Sight
Scotland**

**Yes, I want to change
the lives of people
with sight loss**



**Sight
Scotland**

Tackling vision loss together

Please fill in your details below:

Title: **Forename:** **Surname:**

Address:

..... **Postcode:**

1. I would like to give a one-off gift of:

Here is my donation of: ☐ £12 ☐ £22 ☐ £54 or my own choice of £

☐ I enclose a cheque or voucher made payable to Sight Scotland
OR please debit my card:

☐ Credit/debit card ☐ CAF Charity Card

Card No: ---

Expiry Date: / Security code:

Name on card:

Signature:

Or

2. I would like to make a monthly gift

Giving a regular gift to Sight Scotland helps us plan ahead with confidence, which is vital to us reaching and supporting more people with sight loss across Scotland.

I would like to make a monthly gift of £3 ☐ £5 ☐ £8 ☐ Or my choice of £

Please collect my payment on the ☐ 1st or ☐ 15th of every month
(please tick your preferred date).

Name and full address of your Bank/Building Society:

To: The Manager Bank / Building Society

Address:

Postcode:

Name(s) of Account Holder(s):

Bank / Building Society Account Number Branch Sort Code

- -

Service User Number



Reference (for office use only)

Instruction to your Bank or Building Society. Please pay Sight Scotland Direct Debits from the account detailed in this Instruction subject to the safeguards assured by the Direct Debit Guarantee. I understand that this Instruction may remain with Sight Scotland and, if so, details will be passed electronically to my Bank/Building Society. Banks and Building Societies may not accept Direct Debit Instructions for some types of account.

Signature(s):

Date:

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Please return to the Sight Scotland, NOT to your bank.
We will confirm your new regular donation details by letter.

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3. My Gift Aid

Make your donation worth 25% more with Gift Aid. If you are a UK tax payer, we can reclaim 25p for every £1 you donate – just tick the box below.

☐ Yes, I am a UK tax payer and I would like Sight Scotland to reclaim tax on all donations I have made in the past 4 years or will make in the future until I notify you otherwise. I understand that if I pay less Income Tax and / or Capital Gains Tax than the amount of Gift Aid claimed on all my donations in that tax year it is my responsibility to pay any difference. Please notify us if you want to cancel this declaration, change your name or home address or if you no longer pay sufficient tax on your income and / or capital gains.

4. Communications preferences

Please let us know if we can continue to communicate about our work, progress and future needs so that together we can ensure everyone in Scotland with sight loss has someone to turn to.

Please contact me by phone. My number is:

Please contact me by email. My address is:

We're committed to keeping your details safe, and we will never sell them. Raising funds is crucial to our work, but if you'd prefer not to receive fundraising communications from us, please email us at privacy@sightscotland.org.uk You can see how we protect and use your personal data in our privacy policy at sightscotland.org.uk/privacy

Your continuing support means so much to people with sight loss

Across Scotland, thousands of people living with sight loss have no one they can turn to for help. But by giving a precious gift today, you can offer hope and transform lives. We have several projects we are actively fundraising for. If you would like your donation to go to a specific campaign, please select below.

☐

Where my donation is most needed

☐

The Family Wellbeing Service and Support Line

☐

Royal Blind School



**Sight
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Tackling vision loss together