



RNIB NI Manifesto

Campaigning for people with sight loss in Northern Ireland

RNIB
Northern
Ireland

Supporting people
with sight loss

Introduction

The 2011 Northern Ireland Census reported that 30,862 local people are living with long-term sight loss, while other statistics estimate this number to be as high as 50,000 – or 2.8% of the population.

In the next 15 minutes, someone in the UK will be told they are losing their sight. We're RNIB and we're here for everyone affected by sight loss. Whether you're losing your sight or you're blind or partially sighted, our practical and emotional support can help you face the future with confidence.

The Royal National Institute of Blind People Northern Ireland (RNIB NI) has identified a number of crucial areas where our politicians can make some key decisions to change tens of thousands of lives for the better at relatively little cost.

The needs of blind and partially sighted people are frequently underestimated. Sight loss affects the ability to receive and use information, to get out and about and travel independently, to act effectively as an informed consumer and, generally, to participate in society.

A key role for RNIB NI is to ensure the early detection of sight loss as 50% of sight loss is avoidable. RNIB NI raises awareness of the importance of regular eye tests and attending screening programmes for those who need to.

The Eye Care Liaison Officers also play a key role in ensuring patients comply with medication which further reduces avoidable sight loss.

However, Northern Ireland is currently facing a waiting list crisis within ophthalmology. Drastic measures need to be taken immediately to ensure that people are not losing their sight while waiting to be seen.

Our Call to Action!

Our call is that the Minister and the Health and Social Care Board develop and implement a comprehensive Action Plan which tackles capacity and demand issues within ophthalmology.

RNIB's position is aligned with the three outcomes from the UK Vision Strategy. What is required is that:

- Everyone in the UK knows how to look after their eyes and their sight
- Everyone with an eye condition receives timely treatment and, if permanent sight loss occurs, there are early and appropriate services and support
- We have a society where people with sight loss can fully participate.

Our Call to Action!

Northern Ireland Assembly Members are in a position to make a huge difference to local people who are blind or partially sighted people – who tend to be older, less well off, but who hail from any section of the community. This manifesto outlines how this can be done.



Executive summary

We have identified four main areas requiring action: accessible transport; safe streets; accessible information and welfare reform.

Taken together, they provide a comprehensive list of common problems for people with sight loss. This manifesto sets out a series of actions, that if enacted, will have a huge impact for people with sight loss in Northern Ireland.

① Accessible transport

- Those with sight loss rely more heavily on public transport than sighted people generally
- An affordable, accessible and frequent transport system is needed to provide people with sight loss with independence and the ability to participate in society

② Safe streets

- A recent RNIB survey found that the vast majority of blind or partially sighted people had collided with an obstacle in their local neighbourhood over a three month period
- RNIB NI calls on local councils to work with us and local residents who are blind and partially sighted to agree and implement Street Charters for their areas to minimise the risks across Northern Ireland

③ Accessible information

- Effective communication underpins everything else – information that is not accessible is not effective
- RNIB NI believes some fundamental changes in how we approach communications need to occur – in healthcare particularly, but throughout society to some degree – this can provide a very efficient and cost-effective way to allow existing and future services to flourish

④ Welfare reform

- In whichever way welfare reform is resolved in Northern Ireland, it needs to provide people with sight loss the opportunity for independence
- RNIB NI's expertise should be utilised – we should have a leading role in providing advice on the fine details of the appropriate parts of welfare reform, especially any local adjustments to reform. Our Welfare Rights team should also be supported to provide assistance to blind and partially sighted people to ensure they can access benefits they are entitled to



① Accessible transport



Safe, accessible transport is central to the wellbeing, independence and day-to-day lives of so many blind and partially sighted people. It is not a luxury. It is a fundamental right.

Northern Ireland has made great strides in improving access to transport, but there is still a long way to go: barriers to travel remain the most common issue reported by people with sight loss.

Our research has uncovered four key areas where barriers still exist in Northern Ireland: affordability, availability, accessibility and awareness.

Affordability

Currently whilst blind people can travel free on public transport, partially sighted people have to pay half fare. In addition, companions do not get any rebate on fares.

We are calling for the same system that is in place in the Republic of Ireland where partially sighted people and companions of blind and partially sighted passengers travel free of charge. In addition, in some areas the cost of community transport is too high for those on low incomes.

Availability

Budget cuts are further reducing the availability of public transport, especially in rural areas, leaving people isolated and vulnerable.

Community transport schemes, though valued and welcomed, are inconsistent across Northern Ireland, so whether you get a good service or not is a postcode lottery. Both these areas need to be addressed.

Accessibility

We welcome the continued implementation of audio announcement services across the Metro Bus service in Belfast, since the general lack of audio provision is the biggest single barrier to blind and partially sighted people using buses. We also recommend training for drivers in how to effectively communicate with people with sight loss, for example telling

them when they have reached their stop.

Other issues include poor signage at bus stops and stations, the need for better online accessibility and improved physical accessibility to some vehicles. This is especially disappointing as guidance around accessibility is readily available to designers.

Awareness

There is a need for visual awareness training for all transport staff. This applies equally to front line staff at stations, on trains and buses as well as planners and management, to ensure that the needs of those with sight loss are factored into decision-making at every stage.

Our Call to Action!

Progress has been made, and should be acknowledged. However, we would like your support in extending free travel passes to partially sighted people and to companions of blind and partially sighted passengers.

Policy makers need to be aware of the effects of cuts to public transport, and the impact they have on rural communities in particular. The cuts should be reviewed with these impacts in mind. Similarly there is a need for a consistent and universal community transport scheme across Northern Ireland to replace the current postcode lottery.

The audio announcement systems for buses currently being implemented in Belfast should be rolled out across Northern Ireland as quickly as possible and there should be a review of signage, online technology and the accessibility of vehicles.

Visual Awareness training programmes need to be put in place for all transport staff, including front line staff, planners and management, to ensure that they fully understand the needs of people with sight loss and can ensure that public transport is safe and accessible for them.

② Safe streets



For anyone with sight loss our streets are dangerous obstacle courses, posing a real risk of injury.

Last year we carried out a survey with 500 blind and partially sighted people – **almost all said they had collided with at least one obstacle over the past three months, with one third injured as a result.**

We want to work with the Department for Regional Development (DRD), the Department of Social Development (DSD) and local councils to eliminate these threats and make our streets safe for all to use. Most of what is required can be done for no or very little cost and would make an enormous contribution to the quality of life of the 31,000–50,000 blind and partially sighted people in Northern Ireland. In many

cases, we are only asking for the enforcement of laws and adherence to government guidance already in existence.

The main issues we need to address are as follows:

Enabling blind and partially sighted people to cross roads in safety: accessible crossing points are essential and we want the authorities to consult with those affected to cover gaps in existing provision. We call on the relevant authorities to enforce guidance related to audible beeps, rotating cones and tactile paving.

Shared space schemes that remove kerbing and tactile paving: there is a growing trend for such schemes. We are not opposed to them per se, but when they are designed the needs of blind and partially sighted people to get around safely must be considered and addressed effectively. Failure

to do so is a breach of equality legislation. Local councils should work with us and local blind and partially sighted people to draw up Street Charters to address such issues.

Parking on pavements: is increasingly common even though it is unlawful. It is extremely hazardous for blind and partially sighted people who often injure themselves bumping into vehicles that should not be obstructing pavements. The law needs to be properly enforced.

Advertising boards left on pavements: This was the number one cause of injury in our survey. Local councils have the power to remove these obstacles and we want to see firm action if they are not located in a safe space or within an enclosed area.

Street and café furniture: More and more premises are spilling out onto our streets. This is fine if the area is properly cordoned off and does not block adequate access to pavements. However, where this is not properly controlled retailers are creating dangerous hazards. We welcome the Licensing of Pavement Cafés Act 2014; we ask DSD to continue to work with us to ensure that the guidance is

strong and reflective of all the issues raised. We look forward to working with local councils as they implement the legislation, and ask that we work closely together to reduce on-street obstacles for blind and partially sighted people as they go about daily life in their neighbourhood.

Wheelie bins left out on the pavement are also a common cause of injury. Many local councils tell residents that they expect bins to be left out on the highway to make it easier for them to be collected. Whilst this might be more convenient for their staff, obstructing the highway in this way is unlawful and we want to see councils amending their advice to prevent further injuries to blind and partially sighted pedestrians.

Our Call to Action!

We want your support to persuade all local councils across Northern Ireland to sign up to the development and the implementation of a Streets Charter in partnership with blind and partially sighted residents. This will assist greatly in making our streets safer and reduce the risk of unnecessary injury.

③ Accessible information

Any effective service needs clear communication. People with sight loss face obvious barriers to accessing information that, for most of the general public, is already easily available.

Unfortunately these barriers are commonplace and range from the frustrating, to the upsetting, to the illogical.

Northern Ireland's health service can be particularly difficult to navigate for anyone with sight loss. It frequently ends up posting letters to people about their sight loss – or general health – which they are simply unable to read. In fact, research indicates that 72% of people with sight loss cannot read information given to them by their GP.

This is clearly an unacceptable situation, leading to confusion, missed appointments and potential knock-on effects for the health of those in question, which all comes at great cost to the public purse.

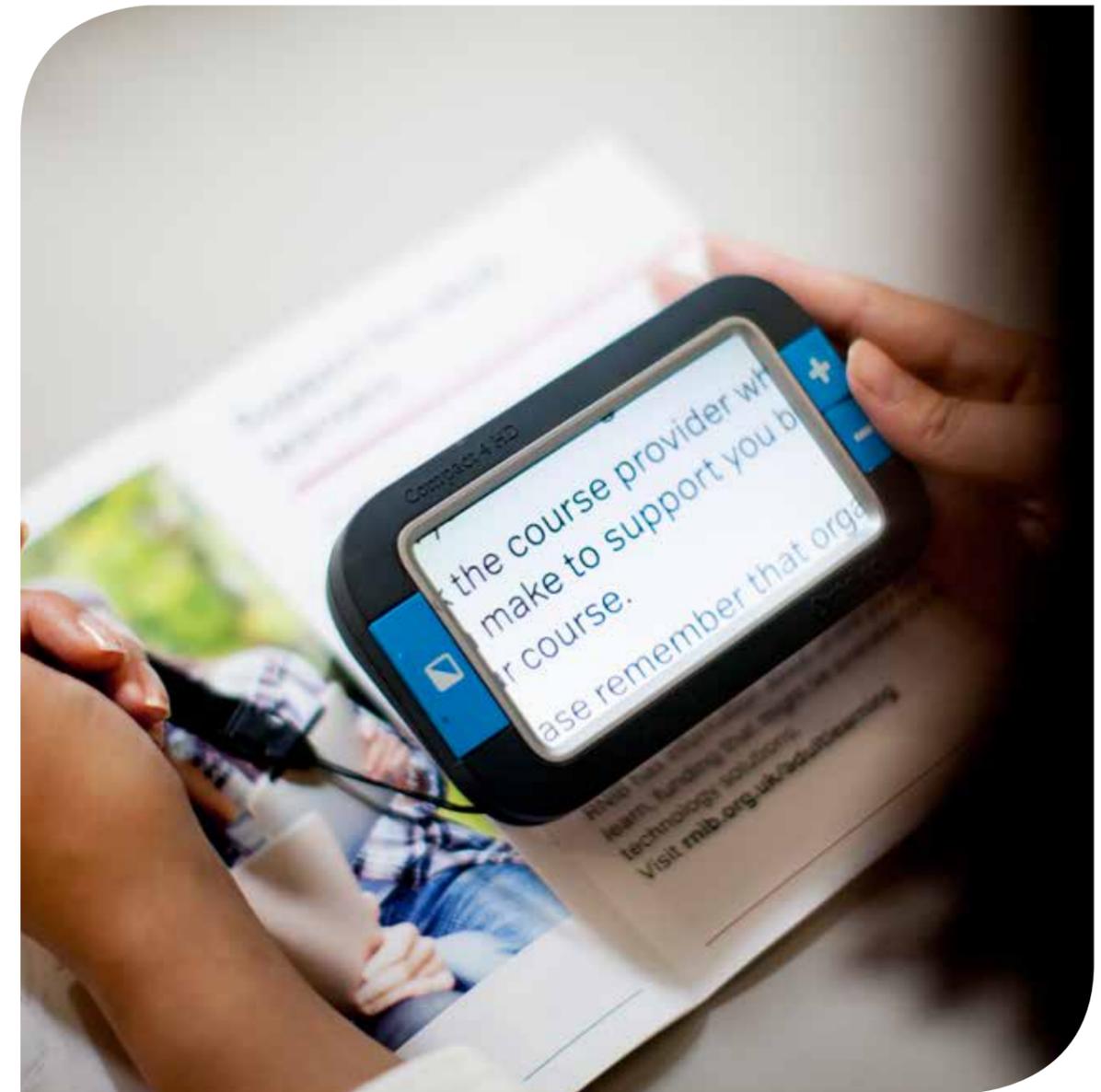
People who have someone to read them the details of such letters can at least access the information, but they still suffer a fundamental breach of medical confidentiality.

Unfortunately this is just one example of how ill-thought-out communication can hamstring what otherwise would be a good service.

In 2012, 34% of people with sight loss (weighted for age and gender) who had tried to access health services in the last 12 months had experienced some or a lot of difficulty, compared with 29% of people with other impairments, and 18% of people with none.

Initiatives that provide fantastic opportunities for people with sight loss are therefore at risk of failure. Any scheme will only ever work as well as the way it is communicated to those who can benefit. Being able to stay informed, in the most general sense, is a key pillar of personal independence.

Across the UK, RNIB has been working hard on several campaigns which centre on accessibility of information. These are especially important in health, where being unable to inform yourself about your own care is not just an issue of practicality and patient safety but also one of basic human rights and medical privacy.



Any scheme will only ever work as well as the way it is communicated to those who can benefit

In England, the RNIB has successfully campaigned for GPs to provide routine and confidential information in a format everyone can read.

In July 2015, the Standards Committee for Care Information approved the NHS Accessible Information Standard. Healthcare providers have until July 2016 to fully implement the standard.

In Northern Ireland, however, this remains a massive issue. In fact, HSCNI lags behind even many private-sector services – such as banks, building societies, utility and telecoms – that can at least offer bills and notices in accessible formats on request, although these could still be improved.

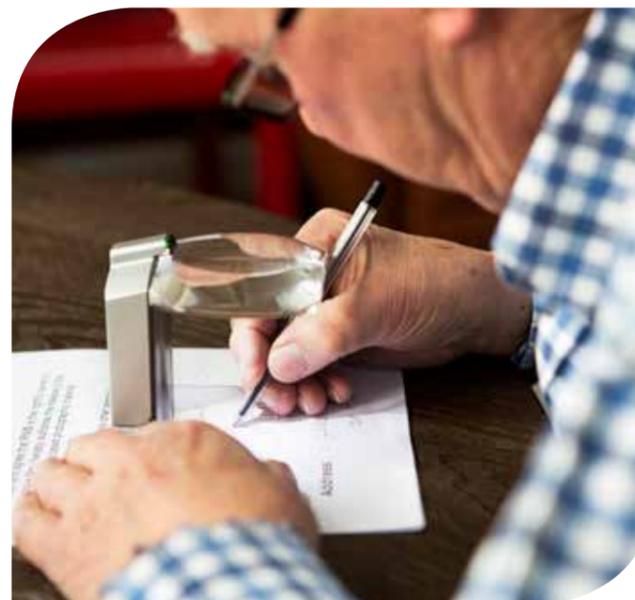
In our local health service, accessibility to information is piecemeal and all too scarce. RNIB has worked in partnership with the Health and Social Care Board and

Action on Hearing Loss to produce best practice guidelines on creating accessible primary care services for people with sensory loss. These need to be implemented. Blind and partially sighted people in Northern Ireland deserve the same treatment as people with sight loss in England.

We have been engaged in several campaigns locally to try and improve communications and access to information for people with sight loss – whether that be in health, welfare, leisure, transport or even shopping.

However, in truth they are all part of the same call to action.

Each campaign, or the root problem it aims to tackle, comes from the same core issue – a lack of accessible information for people with sight loss as standard.



Our Call to Action!

RNIB NI is calling for OFMdfM to develop a cross-governmental policy on accessible information to bring about real fundamental change. Materials should be made available in an appropriate range of accessible formats. It will be especially important in the context of welfare reform. Blind and partially sighted people need information about changes in a format they can access.

We also want elections to be accessible to blind and partially sighted people. Political parties must ensure that they have accessible versions of manifestos available before elections, including accessible electronic versions. We call upon each of the Northern Ireland political parties to publish their Assembly Election manifestos in accessible versions in 2016.

Accessible information will in many cases – particularly healthcare – provide significant savings.

④ Welfare reform

The final details of welfare reform in Northern Ireland are as yet unclear. However, it remains vital that blind and partially sighted people have equal opportunities when it comes to employment - and this includes taking account of the extra costs of disability.

Measures proposed by Chancellor George Osborne in his July Budget designed to help those with disabilities back into work are set to backfire. As things stand, with the Bill currently before Parliament, the changes risk forcing people who will not be fit for employment in the

foreseeable future into poverty and debt.

A large 2012 UK-wide survey found that those with sight loss are already more likely than the general population to experience financial hardship, with 41% saying they face either some or great difficulty in making ends meet – a figure that rises to around 50% amongst those of working age.

Uniquely within the UK, Northern Ireland is in a position to tailor the system here so people with disabilities such as sight loss do not fall through the net.



This is an opportunity that should not be missed – especially as a recent Joseph Rowntree Foundation study found that the extent of the impact of welfare reform in Northern Ireland will be wider than in Great Britain, e.g. the proportion of claimants in Northern Ireland potentially affected by policies like the bedroom tax and DLA's (Disability Living Allowance) transformation to PIP (Personal Independence Payment) will be double the level in Great Britain.

RNIB NI is deeply concerned that welfare reform in Northern Ireland may result in blind and partially sighted people suffering significant financial reductions in already strained circumstances – or losing their entitlement altogether.

Overall, people with sight loss are more than twice as likely as those with no impairment to face great difficulty with personal finances, and again more than twice as likely to be unable to adequately heat their home.

Being blind or partially sighted results in both direct and indirect barriers to employment. They are nearly three times as likely as those with no impairment to experience restrictions in learning, as well as being more than twice as likely to experience inequality in participation in employment (61% compared with 25%).

RNIB NI works in partnership with umbrella organisations like the Citizen's Advice Bureau, Law Centre (NI) and Advice NI which all provide excellent advice services. However, it is important to note that they do not hold the level of expertise and knowledge that our Welfare Rights service has in supporting our service users through the process of applying for benefits.

Expert support is required to help people with sight loss through the welfare reform process and into the new social security system.

Our Call to Action!

The 31,000–50,000 people with sight loss will require genuine support during the welfare reform transition, and RNIB NI would like to see support for the independent and expert advice sector here. Applications for Personal Independence Payment (PIP) are complex and people affected by sight loss may find completing these by themselves particularly difficult. RNIB NI's Welfare Rights service will require public funding in order to cope with anticipated demand.

Most importantly, the views of Northern Ireland's considerable number of disabled people need to be heard throughout the refinement of this policy: voluntary organisations such as RNIB NI must be allowed to feed into the fine details when DSD is developing its mitigation schemes.

RNIB NI is calling for a working group at Stormont around this issue. Further, in relation to the Discretionary Support Commissioner, RNIB NI would recommend that a Disability Advisory Group is established to provide expert guidance on decisions relating to those with sight loss.



Most importantly, the views of Northern Ireland's considerable number of disabled people need to be heard

Conclusion

Sight loss is a problem that affects a large number of people in Northern Ireland. Many of the barriers faced by people who are blind or partially sighted can be alleviated with simple, low-cost changes.

The current situation is contributing to disturbing health and care consequences: people with sight loss report lower feelings of wellbeing, reduced self-confidence and lower satisfaction with their overall health than the general population. Polling shows that across the UK, after standardising for age and gender, people with sight loss are seven times more likely than those with no impairment to feel unhappy or depressed.

Reducing or removing these barriers will improve health, provide opportunities and allow individuals to fulfil their potential.

RNIB NI calls on local politicians to enact the recommendations in this manifesto and make a significant difference to tens of thousands of lives.



Every day thousands of people across the UK are campaigning for change at local, national and international level.

You can find out about all the campaigns we work on, by visiting rnib.org.uk/campaigning

For further information about our campaign work in Northern Ireland please call us on 028 9032 9373 or email campaignsni@rnib.org.uk

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