

## Written evidence submitted by Guide Dogs (CVD0035)

### About Guide Dogs

Guide Dogs provides a range of life-changing services to support the independence of people with sight loss across the UK. Alongside our services, we campaign to remove the barriers that prevent blind and partially sighted people living the life they choose.

Guide Dogs supports children and young people's education and development through its Education Support Service and habilitation provision. It is estimated that there are around 41,000 children and young people with sight loss across the UK, with approximately 35,500 aged 0-25 living in England.<sup>1</sup>

Guide Dogs' Education Support Service provides support, information and advice for families of children with a vision impairment via our telephone advice line, email and internet resources.

In addition, Guide Dogs is a leading provider of habilitation services in the UK. Habilitation is the training and support needed for blind and partially sighted children and young people to gain skills they need to move around independently. This includes mobility, orientation, auditory, navigation and independent living skills.

### Summary

- Though the accessibility of Government communications has improved, further work is needed to embed accessibility as standard
- We remain concerned about the impact of removing or curtailing consultations on measures that will particularly affect people with sight loss, such as changes to street layouts
- Priority access to supermarket delivery slots has improved access to food and essential goods, but social distancing in shops remains difficult for people with sight loss
- Blind and partially sighted people face unique problems with social distancing
- Lack of access to habilitation services will have a significant impact on skills development for children and young people with sight loss, who also face difficulties with remote learning

### Recommendations

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<sup>1</sup> RNIB, Sight Loss Data Tool

1. Government communications should take account of people with sight loss's preferred formats, following a similar process to the NHS Accessible Information Standard.
2. Consultation is essential where changes are likely to affect disabled people. Public authorities making such changes must seek input from affected groups, even if this does not entail a formal consultation process.
3. Support for people with sight loss to access food and essential goods must remain in place until social distancing measures are no longer required.
4. Public health authorities should issue guidance on informal sighted guiding to enable people with sight loss to access this support safely.
5. The Government should launch a public messaging campaign on the different needs of people with disabilities, including people with sight loss, during the pandemic.
6. The Department for Education should issue guidance for schools on supporting children and young people (CYP) with sight loss at this time. In particular, guidance is required on the return to school process, and in the event of further school closures to make sure that remote learning is accessible for CYP with sight loss.
7. Funding for additional habilitation support is needed to ensure that CYP with sight loss do not fall behind in skills development.

### **Inquiry questions**

- **The effectiveness and accessibility of Government communications and consultation with disabled people during the pandemic**

As we raised in our response to the Unequal Impact inquiry, key public health information was not initially available in accessible formats. Since then, the situation has improved. Following a campaign involving Guide Dogs and other organisations representing people with disabilities, the Cabinet Office appointed the Director of National Resilience Communications as national lead on accessibility for the coronavirus response. A subsequent letter to people whose clinical vulnerability means that they have been advised to shield was available in alternative formats for people with vision impairment.

We welcome these commitments to accessible information. Where people with sight loss have made their preferred formats clear, these preferences should be used for future contact, in line with the NHS Accessible Information Standard, which specifies an approach to identifying, recording and meeting the communication needs of service users with a disability.

While we recognise the need to move quickly to respond to public health needs, we remain concerned about the impact of removing or curtailing periods of

public consultation on measure that will particularly affect people with sight loss, such as changes to street layouts.

Local authorities across the countries are making changes to street design to reallocate space to pedestrians with limited or no consultation. People with sight loss stand to benefit from these changes, but without careful design and effective communication, new layouts can inadvertently create additional challenges. We have published guidance for local authorities<sup>2</sup> on how to involve people with sight loss in the design process, as well as communicating the changes effectively.

In addition, the Business and Planning Bill would reduce the consultation period for licences for pavement furniture from 28 days to 7 days, with the only statutory requirement for publicity a physical notice placed on the premises. This would leave people with sight loss shut out of the consultation process on changes to the street environment which could have a significant impact on disabled pedestrians.

- **Disabled people's access to food and the effectiveness of the Government's response to reported problems**

We highlighted the serious problems that people with sight loss encountered accessing food and essential goods in our original response to the Unequal Impact inquiry. We have worked with other sight loss organisations to raise this issue directly with the Government and supermarkets. In June, we agreed with Defra and supermarkets that priority delivery slots would be made available to people with sight loss in England who are having difficulties accessing food. These priority slots are now available by referral through local authorities and the RNIB's Helpline.

Social distancing while shopping remains difficult for people with sight loss. We therefore believe that this support should continue until social distancing measures are no longer necessary, and the Government should have clear plans for ensuring this support can be rolled out quickly in the event of further lockdowns.

### **Social distancing: impact on people with sight loss**

As we emerge from lockdown measures, blind and partially sighted people are encountering unique difficulties with social distancing measures.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.guidedogs.org.uk/about-us/what-we-do/research/Policy-and-guidance-for-businesses/street-design-guidance-for-local-authorities>

Guide Dogs has conducted over 25,000 ‘Keeping in Touch’ calls with our service users since lockdown began. One of the major themes that has emerged is the erosion of confidence amongst many people with sight loss due to a lack of clear guidance on how they can access formal and informal support to help them leave the house and live independently.

Many people with sight loss rely on sighted guiding from another person, which normally involves physical contact at close quarters. This guiding can be provided informally and formally. Informally, blind or partially sighted people may ask friends or family for support or make use of a volunteering programme such as Guide Dogs’ My Sighted Guide. Formally, this assistance is provided when using public transport, or by businesses such as supermarkets.

Guide Dogs has issued guidance for transport operators to help them work with people with sight loss and has been pleased to see rail operators recommending ways of reintroducing sighted guiding<sup>3</sup>. However, there is still ambiguity about the status of informal sighted guiding. We have written to the Health Secretary and Public Health England asking them to clarify guidance around informal sighted guiding so that people with sight loss can seek this essential support while minimising transmission risks.

A major concern for many blind and partially sighted people is support from the general public. Research conducted by Guide Dogs in June found that 65% of the general public had not considered until prompted the impact social distancing policies have had on people with sight loss.

Just 22% of the general public would feel ‘completely comfortable’ offering to help someone with sight loss while social distancing measure were in place.

Reasons for a lack of comfort included not knowing how to help from two metres away (50%) and being concerned about making physical contact (37%).

Clear public messaging and guidance would help address these concerns and give people the confidence to help when needed. We recommend a public messaging campaign to make sure that people are aware of the different needs of disabled people during the pandemic, including the difficulties people with sight loss have following social distancing rules.

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<sup>3</sup> A number of rail operators have clarified how they are maintaining their legal duty to provide passenger assistance. For example, [West Midlands Railway](#) have advised visually impaired customers to “rest assured we will still provide this [assistance] and position ourselves carefully”. [Chiltern Railways](#) state “When guiding someone with a visual impairment, they will ensure there is no skin-to-skin contact and staff will remain facing forwards.”

- **Disabled people's access to education during the pandemic.**

### **Impact on habilitation services**

Face-to-face contact is a fundamental part of delivering habilitation: a child who can see will typically develop skills through watching and imitating what family members and other people do in everyday situations. Children and young people (CYP) with a vision impairment need to develop different strategies to learn everyday skills such as walking, dressing and using public transport, and habilitation often uses touch to help develop these skills.

Covid-19 restrictions have naturally significantly impacted on habilitation services. At the start of the pandemic, Guide Dogs developed alternative methods to support CYP and their families. Our new "Hab@Home" service aims to provide an alternative to face-to-face delivery, offering digital resources and regular contact to CYP and their families over the phone or via video calls.

The lack of habilitation provision will have a particularly significant impact on children and young people who are due to start education, or are transitioning between schools, further education or adult services over the coming months. Habilitation input is crucial during these transitions, both in preparing the child or young person for changes and supporting teaching staff in the educational environment or adult service.

Habilitation provision during this transitional stage often supports familiarisation around the school building, learning routes around school, and learning how to get to and from school safely and independently. It often also involves teaching sighted guide techniques to staff within the education setting and completing environmental audits. Much of this practical teaching will not be possible if current restrictions remain in place. It is also difficult to conduct an environmental audit without being physically present. This could result in significant stress and anxiety for CYP and their families in the coming months.

Guide Dogs is sharing resources with parents, professionals and CYP service users to prepare for the transition, but we remain concerned that more is needed for children with sight loss to feel safe and confident in their classrooms.

The lack of habilitation services will also have a significant impact on early years. Habilitation interventions over this time can be vital to support the development of key early years milestones, as well as helping parents understand how they can best support their child's development. Most of this work is normally conducted face-to-face within the family home, with observations by the Habilitation Specialist being key to assessment, delivering

activities and monitoring progress. It is unlikely that children with additional or complex needs who were in receipt of occupational therapy, physiotherapy and speech and language therapy are still being supported by those professionals, so the impact is even more significant.

As restrictions loosen, it is likely that many CYP with sight loss will need additional habilitation support to recap on skills that they may have forgotten over this period, learn new skills which relate to the pandemic such as social distancing, changes in how they move around a school or shop, and staying safe on public transport.

### **Challenges with remote learning**

While children with SEND were entitled to remain in school during the lockdown period, most families that Guide Dogs work with did not send their children to school, leaving them reliant on remote learning. A survey of families with a CYP with sight loss, conducted in May by sight loss sector organisations (including Guide Dogs) found that only 2% reported that their child was still attending school<sup>4</sup>.

From calls to the Guide Dogs helpline, we have heard mixed reports on contact with schools while pupils were not attending. A survey of the parents of CYP with sight loss found that 44% of families had only had contact with their child's school generally, rather than a specified person suitable for supporting the child's sight loss<sup>5</sup> (i.e. no contact with the child's Qualified Teacher for the Visually Impaired (QTVI) in addition to no contact with the child's teaching assistant or SEND coordinator).

Calls to the helpline have also highlighted the challenges with accessing children's schoolwork remotely. Several families have reported to the helpline that the school materials being sent for the child are inaccessible: for example, with documents being sent without descriptions for images, or being formatted in a way that the child cannot read it or use a screen-reader. This appears to be due to lack of awareness of the needs of pupils with sight loss and how best to cater for them.

In one instance, a LA issued a child with an iPad so that they could access their schoolwork, yet the settings were locked so the family weren't able to turn on the accessibility functions of the iPad. Families have reported having to pressure schools or LAs to ensure the work was accessible, yet often, the challenges could be easily resolved: for example, a family did not have access

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<sup>4</sup> Vision Impairment Sector Survey to Families of CYP with sight loss, conducted May 2020 - see response to Education Select Committee inquiry

<sup>5</sup> *ibid*

to a printer and the documents being sent over by email weren't in an accessible format, but after contact with the school they agreed to print off work in large print accessible to the child and post these to the child instead. This demonstrates that often there are straightforward solutions, but the difficulty comes in families having to "fight" to ensure their child can access education remotely.

While there has been a drive for many services to go digital, some families do not have access to smart devices or broadband. This excludes them from online support such as digital materials and activities, video calls or Zoom groups. There is also the issue of accessing alternative resources where English is not the first language and interpreters may not be available. This significantly impacts on education and for delivering alternative forms of habilitation.

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