

Written Evidence submitted by Royal National Institute of Blind People (RNIB)

About Sight Loss in the UK

Every day 250 people start to lose their sight	At least half of all sight loss is avoidable	More than two million people have sight loss	350,000 registered blind or partially sighted	Age-related macular degeneration is the leading cause of blindness in adults.
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Summary

The lockdown measures introduced due to coronavirus have had a disproportionate impact on blind and partially sighted people in the UK. Social distancing is by definition more difficult – if not impossible – for those who cannot use vision to judge distance.

Although the majority of blind and partially sighted people did not fall into the government's 'clinically extremely vulnerable group', new rules and restrictions have made many situationally vulnerable. Access to food and information has been a key issue. The government's approach, has, in fact, made the situation worse for blind and partially sighted people and shows a concerning 'one size fits all' approach to 'vulnerable people'.

For example, at the beginning of the pandemic, the government prioritised online shopping delivery slots for the 'clinically extremely vulnerable group'. Many blind and partially sighted people have relied on this service for access to groceries for years. This approach, in a sweep, left many blind and partially sighted people without access to food.

The government also failed to provide information about this new approach in formats that blind and partially sighted people could understand. The original shielding letter, for example, was not available in accessible formats.

The government needs to adopt a baked-in approach to accessibility from the start. Policy needs to be checked against its impact on all disabled people before it is implemented.

Access to Groceries

At the beginning of the pandemic, the RNIB's advice service received an average of over 100 calls a day from people who struggled to access essential groceries.

Eligibility for online and home-delivery services

'Government adverts say 'stay home, save lives' but blind people who rely on online food shopping are being forced to go shopping where they can't get help'

At the beginning of the pandemic, supermarkets were instructed by the Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) to prioritise the 1.5m people at high risk of developing serious symptoms from coronavirus, and who have been advised to isolate for 12 weeks. When this decision was made we heard from blind and partially sighted people used to relying on supermarket deliveries that this service had effectively been taken away from them.

After months of campaigning, Defra recognised specific challenges faced by people with sight loss, among others, and secured online shopping slots from a number of major supermarkets for people whose independence has been challenged by the lockdown, including those with sight loss.

While this issue was eventually alleviated as a result of campaigning by charities, for months, many blind and partially sighted people were unable to access food.

Accessible Information:

At the beginning of the pandemic, the Government, health officials and businesses have been grappling with the spread of coronavirus, vital information about changes in advice or policy had to be communicated to the public extremely quickly.

However, it seems this had led to such communications not going through the usual processes and accessibility checks. As one in five people aged 75 and over have sight loss, and many blind and partially sighted people have comorbidities, it is vital that information about changes in policy, procedures or advice is accessible to them, giving it the best chance of reaching those at high risk from the virus.

RNIB produced and shared top tips for public bodies on how to ensure their digital communication is accessible and has been sharing it directly with government departments on Twitter, and via the Cabinet Office. After working with the Cabinet Office In response to our concerns, the Cabinet Office has sent out updated guidance by the Office of the Head of Government Communication to heads of digital communication teams across government. The guidance reminds teams of their obligations under the Equality Act to make sure their communications are accessible.

Despite our early highlighting of this issue, progress has been slow and inconsistent. We have found tens of examples of inaccessible communication about coronavirus from government bodies – such as images used to convey information without alt text, or videos without audio - on Twitter. And the letter sent at the end of March to those identified as ‘extremely vulnerable’ was not available in accessible formats, and it is only recently after repeated engagement that RNIB has been given the opportunity to have an audio version.

Summary

These two key areas show that the government’s ‘one size fits all’ approach to ‘vulnerable people’ led to many blind and partially sighted people being left behind during lockdown.

Going forward, the government must adopt a baked in approach to accessibility and ensure that the impact of new policy on blind and partially sighted people – and people with other disabilities – is fully considered before it is rolled out.

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