

Written evidence submitted by Royal National Institute of Blind People (RNIB)(COV0123)

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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1. Introduction

The lockdown has had a disproportionately negative impact on people who are blind and partially sighted people in the UK. Social distancing measures are particularly difficult for people with sight loss, and as a result shopping for essentials has become significantly more challenging. Added to this, online delivery slots are hard, if not impossible, to book. With no suitable alternatives in place, we have found that people who are blind or partially sighted are finding it difficult to obtain the very basics needed to survive.

Indeed, since the outbreak the RNIB’s Sight Loss Advice Service has received an average of over 100 calls a day from people who are struggling to access essential groceries. This is also the biggest issue that people are talking about in our community groups across the UK.

This submission will focus on the following question outlined in the call for evidence:

Are the Government and food industry doing enough to support people to access sufficient healthy food; and are there any groups not having their needs met? If not, what further steps should the Government and food industry take?

2. Impact of social distancing

Keeping two metres away from other people is difficult if not impossible for blind and partially sighted people, and guide dogs aren’t trained to do this. We have heard of instances of passers-by aggressively challenging people with sight loss who have been unable to keep their distance owing to their sight loss.

I'm normally a truly strong and resilient person and can tackle so many things in my life but lockdown is really tough it has taken away so much from me. Going out has become another area of life to negotiate... If people could just keep a wide berth I'd feel a lot more comfortable. The possibility of people getting too close makes me fearful going out. All I ask is for people to just take that little extra care to look around them and we can all be safe together.

People with sight loss who would usually navigate with another person acting as a guide have also been impacted. A study by RNIB in 2015 found that people who are blind or partially sighted are more likely to live alone than the general public, with more than half relying on others from outside their household for support. Social distancing measures have meant that if their guide is not a member of their household, then contact should not be maintained. This has in effect taken away some people's primary means of being able to leave the house.

Many people who are blind or partially sighted are also likely to use touch to navigate – for example, using their hands to identify surfaces, walls or railings. Many blind and partially sighted people who rely more heavily on touch to get about fear that they are at greater risk of contracting the virus from surfaces. As such, many are concerned about the health risks, not only to themselves, but also the general public, from leaving their house.

Will it become a choice of starvation or corona as we can't leave our homes? I live on my own and cannot ask others to jeopardise their safety by getting my shopping'.

All of this makes it incredibly difficult for blind and partially sighted people to get to the shops and then navigate round them.

3. Changes in store

Don't get me started on trying to social distance or follow the one-way systems in supermarkets. I got shouted at by staff for going around the wrong way.

As well as the challenges of social distancing, changes made inside supermarkets are also posing difficulties. Where previously people may have been familiar with their local store, they are now being impacted by changes such as new queuing rules, layout changes, markings on the

floor indicating where to stand, one-way systems, increased signage, or the addition of difficult-to-see Perspex screens, which make using the supermarket a greater challenge. On top of this, some supermarkets are only allowing one adult from each household inside at once – preventing the use of a guide – and social distancing has meant it is less easy to seek assistance from staff who are understandably keen to keep their distance.

Indeed, we are currently investigating several instances of people being turned away from several leading supermarkets because they, alongside their guiders, have not been able to follow the rule that shopping should be done by one adult per household.

RNIB has been contacting supermarkets directly to share best practice on how best to embed accessibility into any operational designs and ensure that the health and safety of customers with sight loss is not put at risk. It includes advice on visual indicators, taking payment and support from staff.

As a result of this outreach we are working directly with supermarkets to create tangible offers to help improve access to food for blind and partially sighted people. Several leading supermarkets have agreed to disseminate our advice and best practice guidelines into their staff training. We are also seeking to obtain priority access to home delivery of shopping for people with sight loss, directly with the supermarkets.

4. Priority Delivery Slots

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.

Ordinarily, online shopping would be an effective alternative to shopping at supermarkets for those who are digitally enabled, as it allows people who are blind or partially sighted to shop safely and independently. However, with the demand for online delivery slots having increased, blind and partially sighted people – some of whom will have relied on this service in the past to maintain their independence – and who now need it more than ever are less able to access home delivery.

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 many people who are blind and partially sighted, who heavily rely on supermarket deliveries in order to do their shopping, that they could no longer do this. In some instances, they had been previously registered as a priority customer with the supermarket directly only for that to be removed.

RNIB alongside several sight loss charities wrote to Defra raising this issue on 27 March. Since the end of March, Defra have been acknowledging that there may be additional reasons people might need support getting essential food supplies, beyond being in the shielded group. On 29 March the Department said: “The Government is working to identify these individuals as soon as possible and is working with food retailers and volunteer groups to help prioritise those individuals for home deliveries or support with getting food supplies.”

On 21 April, alongside other sight loss charities, we submitted our joint petition with 22,653 signatures to Defra, calling for priority delivery slots to be given to those blind and partially sighted people that need them. Our Chief Executives had a call with Defra officials to discuss this issue later that week and it has recently been announced that Defra has secured additional supermarket reserved delivery slots, and officials are intending for those “in desperate need” to be referred into these slots by local authorities.

While this is a useful step forward, we are yet to see the Defra qualifying criteria for these slots, or understand the timetable for roll-out. We are also concerned that by organising the referral in this way, there is a risk that the referral process will be patchy in implementation and may lack overall consistency. We are also unaware of how this would work in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland and how Defra has been joining up with its counterparts in the devolved nations and their local councils on this issue.

5. Conclusion and recommendations

The current circumstances present innumerable challenges which are unique to people with sight loss which have been being highlighted by the press and charities for weeks. While understandable, the decision to ask supermarkets to prioritise the shielded group took existing services away from those who relied on them, and - with social distancing rules

and the resulting changes in-store to supermarkets - created a perfect storm for blind and partially sighted people trying to access groceries.

We are six weeks into lockdown and a proper solution to securing home delivery of food for individuals who are not on the shielded list, but who nonetheless have been made vulnerable by the crisis is yet to be implemented.

Recommendations:

- Urgent action must be taken to ensure that blind or partially sighted people that need them can access priority delivery slots.
- The Government should share the timetable for roll-out of local authority referrals to priority delivery slots and the qualification criteria individuals must meet to be referred to them.
- Where these slots are provided through local authorities, steps must be taken to ensure consistency in how they are assigned
- To ensure those blind and partially sighted people who are not in touch with services are able to access the new referral scheme, local authorities should proactively contact those on their register of sight impaired (partially sighted) or severely sight impaired (blind) people, once the new process is up and running.
- We would like the Government to work with RNIB to create an additional referral route to priority delivery slots accessible to the blind and partially sighted people that need them, potentially through the well-established RNIB helpline
- The Government should work with supermarkets and the devolved administrations to open up additional priority delivery slots to blind and partially sighted people in Wales, Scotland and NI
- We would like Defra to share RNIB best practice with supermarkets that have been less willing to engage directly
- We would like supermarkets to consider and implement our best practice recommendations to make sure stores are as accessible as possible while keeping shoppers and staff safe
- Longer term, Defra and the supermarkets should work with the sight loss sector and blind and partially sighted people more widely to ensure that those who need home delivery most can be identified in the most seamless way through the supermarkets' own systems

About RNIB

The Royal National Institute of Blind People (RNIB) is one of the UK's leading sight loss charities and the largest community of blind and partially sighted people. We provide a wealth of services including practical and emotional support through our RNIB Connect community and our Sight Loss Advice Service, guide business and public services on accessibility, campaign for change, and have a library of over 60,000 accessible reading materials, including daily newspapers.

Every day 250 people begin to lose their sight. We want society, communities and individuals to see differently about sight loss. In our 150th year RNIB renewed our focus on creating a world where there are no barriers to people with sight loss.