

How to be more accessible for blind and visually impaired people





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Someone is visually impaired if they have sight loss which can't be corrected to a normal level even with the use of glasses, contact lenses, surgery or medication. Individuals with permanent and significant sight loss in both eyes may be eligible for a Certificate of Vision Impairment (CVI). This certificate is issued by a consultant ophthalmologist after a clinical assessment. Based on the level of vision loss, a person may be certified as either severely sight impaired (previously referred to as blind) or sight impaired (partially sighted) It's a common misconception that being "blind" means having no vision at all. In reality, most people who are certified as severely sight impaired still retain some degree of vision—such as light perception or limited peripheral vision.

It's important to remember that everyone will have their own unique experience of visual impairment. Some people may use different aids such as symbol canes (a short cane held by someone to symbolise they are visually impaired), long canes or guide dogs. Others may not use any aids at all. Just like some people will want assistance and others won't! There are many useful measures you can put into place to be more inclusive and accessible for visually impaired people.



Positive communication

Visually impaired people can often experience unique challenges when communicating with others. They may be **unable to see non-verbal clues** such as nodding, gestures or facial expressions. This can make it tricky to know if it's their turn to speak, or how engaged the person they are talking to is, for example.

There are some simple things you can do to communicate better:

- Address the person by their name, if you know it, so they know you are speaking to them.
- Introduce or identify yourself. Don't assume that someone will be able to recognise you by your voice alone.
- ❖ Be as specific as possible with directions and descriptions. Avoid saying things such as "it's over there"
- Speak normally and use everyday language. There is no need to avoid words such as 'watch' and 'see'.
- Verbalise your actions especially during long silences. For example, "I am just trying to find my pen"
- Let them know when you are moving away or leaving the conversation.

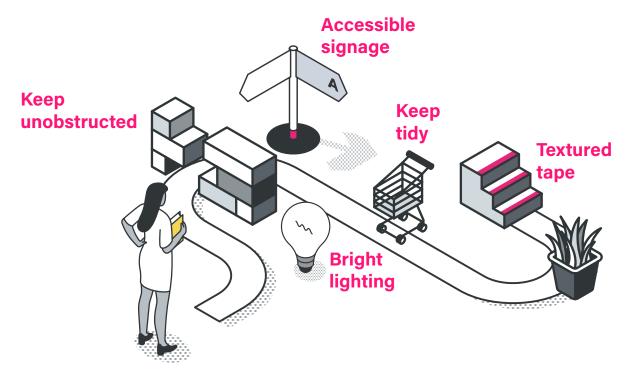
Be flexible

It's important that you are flexible with people who are visually impaired. It may be that they (or you) need to do things in a slightly different way. Be open to this. They may just need a little extra time to do a task or become familiar with their environment for example. Could they work or volunteer from home or have flexible working times so that they don't need to use public transport during rush hour. It may be easier for them to have a virtual meeting or appointment with you. Remember to check in about access requirements and then take it from there.

The physical environment

The physical space can hugely impact both a visually impaired person's experience and their health, safety and wellbeing. Some **simple changes** can make things much more accessible. These include:

- Keeping corridors, pathways and walkways clear.
- Keep lighting bright and glare-free. Adjustable lighting or additional task lighting is helpful.



- Ensure step edges have a contrasting edge or nosing to make them more visible.
- Signs should contrast against their background and be where you would expect to find them. Fonts should be large and clear and ideally include braille.
- Keep spaces tidy and items where you would logically expect them.

Guiding tips

It can be nerve-racking if you aren't used to guiding someone who is visually impaired. Below are some tips to get you started.

- Ask don't assume It's important to ask someone if they want assistance. If they ask you to guide them, ask how they would like to be guided.
- Offer your arm or shoulder The most common method for guiding is when someone holds on to your arm or elbow. It's important that you do not hold onto them, so they are in control. Keep your arm relaxed but firm. Someone may prefer to place a hand on your shoulder and will let you know this.
- Walk at a nice steady pace Try not to walk too slowly as this can make someone feel uncomfortable. Check in and ask them if the pace is ok.

- Lead the way You should let someone know when you are approaching stairs. Communicate important information such as whether the steps are going up or down. Let them know where the handrail is and change sides if needed. On steps you should be one step ahead of the person you are guiding. Make sure you let them know when you have reached the last step. Similarly when guiding through a door, let them know and lead the way. The person you are guiding should be on the hinge side and you go through the door first.
- Never push someone into a chair or push the chair up behind them if you're guiding someone to a chair let them know where it is and offer to place their hand on the arm/back of the chair. Give useful information such as if the chair is on wheels or has an unexpected low seat.
- Guiding in narrow spaces If you need to walk in single file let the person know and move your guiding arm behind you towards the small of your back.
- Communication is key Being a good guide is all about being aware of your surroundings and communicating with the person you are guiding. Tell them about the environment you are in (without overwhelming them) and be specific on instructions and directions.



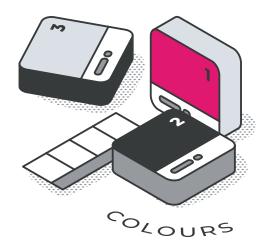
If you have recruited someone who is visually impaired, it's important that you ask if there is any assistive technology they require access to.

Assistive technology

Assistive technology are products that support and assist disabled people to do tasks that they might otherwise find difficult or impossible. Many visually impaired people rely on assistive technology on a day-to-day basis. It could be they use something simple such as a **liquid level indicator** which helps them to avoid overfilling a cup with hot water. Others may use more high-tech technology such as **screen reader** software, **magnification** software, **voice recognition** software and **braille displays**. If you have recruited someone who is visually impaired, it's important that you ask if there is any assistive technology they need.

Digital accessibility

Digital accessibility is about making sure that websites, digital media and documents as well as online platforms and services are accessible for everyone. It's important to note, if products and services are not designed with accessibility in mind, people who use assistive technology often cannot access them. Helpfully, many software applications already have accessibility features built into them. You may just need to spend a



little time finding out what they are. When considering digital accessibility for visually impaired people, some points to think about are:

- Ensuring websites and online platforms are compliant with <u>Web</u> <u>Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG)</u>.
- Adding descriptive text known as 'Alt Text' to images to allow people using screen readers to understand the content of the image.
- Whether audio descriptions are needed for video content.
- Avoiding relying solely on colour to communicate information.
- Whether there is a good colour contrast between the text and the background.

Audio description is a narration technique that provides spoken commentary to describe the visual elements in various forms of media.

If information in alternative formats such as large print, audio files or braille is required.



Read government guidance on <u>accessible</u> <u>communication formats</u> and <u>digital accessibility</u> for more information.

How to be more accessible for people with communication impairments

Communication impairments are when a person has a condition which causes difficulties with their ability to receive, send, process, and/or comprehend concepts of verbal, nonverbal and/or graphic symbol systems. There are different types of communication impairments including speech, language, and processing impairments. The impact of communication impairments varies. Some people may find it hard to ask a question, name an object or understand jokes. Others may have impaired speech that make them difficult to understand.

Positive communication

Everyone's needs are varied but there are some common ways you can improve communication with people with communication impairments.

- Gain someone's attention before talking to them.
- Relax! Remind yourself that communication breakdowns are normal.
- Positive body language can be helpful.
- Be honest. Don't pretend that you understand someone.
- Be patient and give someone time. Avoid finishing off someone's sentence for them. If someone doesn't quickly respond to a question, give them a little extra time rather than asking multiple questions in quick succession.
- You can ask someone to **repeat themselves**. You can do this up to twice and then maybe ask them to rephrase it or say it in a different way.
- Paraphrasing can be a useful way to check you have understood someone.
- Avoiding sarcasm and the use of non-literal expressions.
- Break down information into smaller chunks when needed.
- Avoid making assumptions about someone's cognitive ability.

Be flexible

Often the adjustments that someone with a communication impairment may need, are simple things that are just **tweaks** to the way you do things. They may have a preferred **method** of communication. Some people find it easier talking on video calls rather than on the telephone. Others would prefer to type their thoughts in the chat facility rather than talk in front of lots of people. Tiredness and fatigue can be an issue for some and they may just need a few extra comfort **breaks**. Make sure you're **approachable** and have **open conversations** with people about whether they have any access requirements.

The physical environment

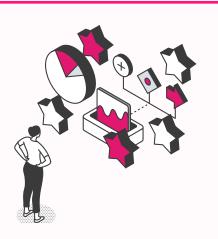
The physical environment can really affect how easy it is to communicate. Some things to think about are.

Reduce background noise



- Close doors and windows or move to a quieter place.
- You can improve the acoustics of a room with soft furnishings, carpets, acoustic panels and ceiling tiles.

Reduce visual distractions



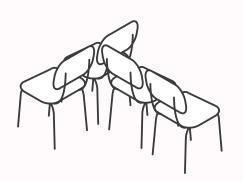
- Having closed or partially closed storage options can help to reduce clutter.
- If there is lots of movement outside, frosted films on windows can be helpful.
- Avoid strong colours and patterned carpets.

Consider the lighting



- The quality of the light and the position can be an issue for some people.
- If someone is backlit their face will be in shadow.
- Have adjustable lighting and be flexible on where people sit.

Position furniture carefully



- Try and make sure that when everyone is seated, they are all at the same eye level and can see each other if required.
- A sitting distance of between 3 and 6 feet from each other tends to be best.

Assistive technology

Some people use communication devices, also known as **augmentative and alternative communication (AAC)** devices, to support them with speech or language. They can be used as well as or instead of speaking. There are a variety of aids available including different software and apps. Be open to people using these devices and any adjustments they may require.

Digital accessibility

There are some simple ways that you can improve digital accessibility for people with communication impairments. Two examples are:

- Having mechanisms in place for identifying specific words or phrases used in unusual ways including idioms and jargon. You should also explain the expanded form or meaning of abbreviations. This could be by explaining what they mean in the text or providing a link to a definition. You could even provide a glossary.
- Having captions and transcripts available can be helpful for some people who have processing impairments.