

“Who put that there!”

The barriers to blind and partially sighted people getting out and about



Supporting people
with sight loss



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Michael Wilson
RNIB Campaigns Team, February 2015

Foreword

How would you react if you didn't feel safe walking to the local shop, taking your dog for a walk or visiting friends nearby? How would it affect your mental health and physical wellbeing?

“I could show you the bottom of my legs. I have a fair amount of bruising, cuts, and old scars from walking into advertising boards.”

Unfortunately people with sight loss face challenges getting around their local area every day. Over two million people live with sight loss, and with someone starting to lose their sight every fifteen minutes this number is set to rise to four million by 2050. Instead of our streets becoming more accessible, they remain a daily obstacle course for those who are blind or partially sighted.

Getting to the GP surgery, shops or accessing local services can be like running the gauntlet, with increased fear, anxiety and a real risk of injury. In a recent survey conducted by RNIB, a third of people said they had been injured during a three month period when walking around their local area. Some people even said they were so intimidated by the risks outside they ended up staying at home and becoming isolated. This is simply not good enough.

People who don't experience sight loss take for granted being able to step into the road if there is a car parked on the pavement, dodge the advertising boards (a-boards) littering the high street, and cross the road safely when the cars stop and the red man turns green. We all want to make our streets safer for pedestrians, but removing crossings, kerbs and tactile paving can have a devastating impact on someone with sight loss. And on bin day, narrow pavements can end up being a dangerous assault course.



“Often with cars parked on pavements, I can't squeeze past. To get round, I have to go into the road.”

We at RNIB know it's impossible for streets to always be obstacle free, but we also know that individuals, decision makers and organisations are missing real opportunities to make our streets accessible. We want decision makers to understand how blind and partially sighted people – including those with some existing vision, as well as guide dogs and cane users – navigate the street environment. It's crucial people in a position of influence are aware of the aids and adaptations that help someone with sight loss get around. This understanding could really help tackle one of the biggest barriers facing blind and partially sighted people today.

We believe the most effective way to implement the changes needed is to engage with local blind and partially sighted residents, creating a clear set of policies and practices which are informed, shaped and delivered by those who have sight loss.

If government and local authorities truly want to enable blind and partially sighted people to fulfil their potential, as the Office of Disability Issues (ODI) state that they should be, then they need to ensure that this starts with a street environment that isn't a fundamental barrier to their progress and independence.

Fazilet Hadi
RNIB Managing Director, Engagement



Executive summary

This report sets out evidence which demonstrates how unsafe local neighbourhoods and the street environment can be for those with sight loss. To help shape our report and findings we carried out a survey of blind and partially sighted people, alongside investigating some of the policies and procedures local authorities currently have in place to shape the built environment [\[1\]](#).

Blind and partially sighted people told us that, on a day to day basis, they face the following problems when out and about:

- Street obstacles, both permanent and temporary, injuring blind and partially sighted people, sometimes seriously – such as bollards, advertising boards (a-boards), bins, cars parked on pavements and street furniture.
- Dangerous roads which do not have adequate, safe or accessible pedestrian crossings.
- Developments that remove kerbs and crossing points making an area more difficult for blind and partially sighted people to walk around – including developments sometimes called shared space or shared surfaces.



Challenges are also faced in the way local authorities communicate information affecting the street environment to blind and partially sighted residents, including:

- Local authorities making decisions which impact on the street environment, without understanding the mobility needs of someone living with sight loss.
- Communication from local authorities being issued on inaccessible posters or notices.
- Consultations that are promoted and issued using inaccessible formats, alongside local authorities failing to involve and engage people with sight loss.
- A postcode lottery approach to policy and decision making by those who have an impact on the design and enforcement of the street environment.

RNIB is calling for three key changes:

- 1 The government to review 2005 guidance called “Inclusive mobility: a guide to best practice on access to pedestrian and transport infrastructure”. We want provisions to be strengthened around highway obstructions, and reinforcing existing legislation around the use of tactile paving, kerbs and crossings.
- 2 Local authorities to engage with local blind and partially sighted people to develop a street charter that puts a clear highway policy at the heart of their local decision making.
- 3 Local authorities to review their policies in relation to the six most common obstacles (parking on pavements, a-boards, inaccessible crossings, bins and recycling boxes on pavements, street furniture, and developments that include shared space) facing blind and partially sighted people.

What we know

To help inform and shape this RNIB report we carried out freedom of information requests of all English local authorities, and conducted a survey of blind and partially sighted people [\[2\]](#). Over 500 people responded and this is what they told us:

Street obstacles and the problems

- 95 per cent of blind and partially sighted people have collided with an obstacle in their local neighbourhood over a three month period.
- Nearly a third of those were injured, yet less than one percent claimed compensation for injuries.
- The most common obstacles collided with are:
 - cars parked on pavements (70 per cent)
 - bins of all kinds (64 per cent)
 - permanent and temporary street furniture (59 per cent and 55 per cent)
 - advertising boards (49 per cent).
- No local authority monitored how many blind and partially sighted people were being injured.



Keith's experience (South East)

“I am 70 years old and registered blind. I recently fell over an a-board placed directly outside a local grocery shop. As a result I sprained both wrists and have had to have painkillers and inflammation gel from the doctor. Even now, when I use my long cane, if it jars against an obstacle in my path it causes me a lot of pain. I am also worried about whether I have sustained any long term damage as I am a keen musician. I contacted the district council, county council and the police, to complain about the a-board but no-one was interested. They either said it was nothing to do with them, or that it was the grocer's responsibility.”

RNIB has since found out that the local authority informally licenses a-boards, ie they allow the use of a-boards if certain conditions are met, but do not seem to check compliance with these conditions.

One of the conditions is that any a-board is placed on the building line, even though many blind people navigate using the building line. Another is that the advertiser must have public liability insurance in place. Unfortunately it seems that the grocer in question didn't have this.



These experiences are all too common and the impact on blind and partially sighted people cannot be underestimated. It's hard to show the massive impact these issues have for those living with sight loss but the following snap shot should give some insight into the everyday experiences:

“I could show you the bottom of my legs. I have a fair amount of bruising, cuts, and old scars from walking into advertising boards. One day, somebody had knocked down a metal a-board and it was lying on the floor with its legs poking into the air. I walked straight into the upturned leg, which was very painful.” **Bob, North East**

“Often with cars parked on pavements, I can't squeeze past. To get round, I have to go into the road around the car. On busy, main roads this can be quite scary.” **Sarah, East Midlands**

“I live near a market town, with a small high street. On one Saturday, my husband and I counted 34 a-boards on the streets. One shop had three a-boards outside. Street furniture is also a big problem, our town has chairs, hanging baskets and tubs of flowers on the pavements. I'm sure it looks very attractive to people on a nice sunny day, but it's very difficult for me as I bump into them. I've also bumped into bins on the pavements which can be quite painful.” **Judith, North East**



“On rubbish collection day bins are often left at funny angles on the street, or in the middle of pavement. With bins on one side and cars parked on the other, there is barely any space to get round the pavement. I often end up in the middle of the road.” **Hazel, North East**

“Bins are a big problem. When the rubbish bins are collected they are left out on the pavements, this makes it harder for me to walk around. The pavements aren't wide enough to get round if there is a bin on them as well. I have hurt myself so many times. I have fallen over and I have scraped my arm or my knee on the bins. I sometimes get abuse from people down my street, because when I knock into the bins they sometimes fall over and damage the cars.” **Mohammed, London**

Crossings and the problems

- 55 per cent of blind and partially sighted people said their local roads were either not very safe or unsafe.
- 40 per cent of people without sight loss also said their local roads were either not very safe or unsafe.
- 74 per cent of blind and partially sighted people said that there was a need for more pedestrian crossings in their area.
- 67 per cent face the inconvenience of having to take longer journeys in order to cross roads at safe pedestrian crossings.
- Only 17 per cent of pelican crossings were completely accessible with tactile paving, rotating cones and audible beeps in place.
- Around half of local authorities couldn't even provide information about the accessibility of the crossings they manage.



Joyce's experience (North East)

Joyce was registered blind six years ago, and has problems with the local crossings in her area:

“I have some peripheral vision, and can walk around using a cane in daylight. Unfortunately I can't go out at night at all as I just can't see anything. In my town I only have one crossing with a cone on. I constantly ring the council as the audible signals often don't work.

In order to cross the road safely, I need to hear the sound from the other side of the road. Hearing the sound on the opposite side of the road, helps me walk in a straight line, I walk towards the noise. If this isn't working, it's a big problem. I often have to plan my route, I can't be spontaneous. I don't let it stop me going out though, because if I stopped going out I'd never go out again.”

Rose's experience (South West)

Local campaigner Rose was successful at getting a crossing installed:

“We have quite good crossings locally now, but it hasn't always been like this. There used to be a zebra crossing near my house, but it had a place to stop in the middle. For me, it was like being in a cage. It's a busy main road, so the problem was when I was in the middle, the traffic behind me started moving and I couldn't hear what was happening in front of me. Unfortunately I had no choice, I had to use it. It was the only crossing on the way to town and the bus stop.



I decided to lobby the council, and neighbours. I went to council meetings, explaining why it was important. I did a petition and submitted it as evidence. The campaign took about 4 years but now we have an accessible crossing. It's lovely to press the button, and know I can cross safely.”

New developments (including town centres and shared spaces) and the problems

We all want to make our streets safer for pedestrians, but many people may not realise that removing crossings, kerbs and tactile paving can have a devastating impact.

- Over half of blind and partially sighted people reported that recent building developments in their area had made it either a little harder, or much harder, for them to get about.
- Many couldn't avoid using these areas, but 40 per cent were either using the area less or avoiding it altogether.
- Two thirds had not been consulted about these changes to their neighbourhoods. This is consistent with reports from local authorities with none being able to provide figures on how many accessible versions of planning information, like consultations, had been provided to blind and partially sighted people.
- Few local authorities provided evidence of robust consultation policies for planning and highway disruptions.



Mohammed's experience (London)

“In my area we have floating bus stops. This is where they have introduced cycle lanes that continue straight forward even when a bus is at the stop. So the bus pulls in away from the kerb, and you walk across the cycle lane. I don't know where they got the idea, but they are becoming very popular in London. I find it a nightmare when I'm on my own. I worry I could easily be hit by a cyclist.”



Anne's experience (North West)

“I was born blind. I can see light and dark but I don't see any other useful clues such as steps or obstacles. I have a guide dog who works with me to navigate the streets.

We don't have shared space in my area yet, but the council looked at introducing one. To be prepared, I went to look at one in a nearby town. Shared space seems to work on the drivers and pedestrians making eye contact and signalling who will make the first move. But I can't make eye contact or see what a driver is intending to do. Even if drivers are really attentive, it makes me very vulnerable.

My guide dog had no idea what to do. He normally gives me some direction, but he needs markings like kerbs so he knows which bit is the road and which bit is the pavement. When we cross a road he needs the kerb to govern where the crossing point is. You can't direct your dog, there are no landmarks, it's just a massive square. You can't judge where you are. My dog was so confused he just stopped moving. I know many of my friends who are blind or partially sighted say these spaces are no-go areas for them.”

The law

There is a significant amount of legislation, regulations and guidance which are relevant to blind and partially sighted people's access to the street environment.

Keeping the streets clear

Under the Highways Act 1980 it is the duty of the highway authority to assert and protect the rights of the public to use and enjoy the highway (the term highway in this instance includes pavements). They also have a duty to prevent obstruction to the highway (again this means keeping pavements clear).

It is a criminal offence under the Highways Act (and the Town and Police Clauses Act) to wilfully obstruct free passage along the highway, and to deposit anything on the highway which causes an interruption to, or obstruction of, the highway.

So streets should be kept clear of obstacles and clutter, enabling people to walk along them without any problems.



The Equality Act

The Equality Act 2010 makes it unlawful for public authorities, including highways authorities, to discriminate in the exercise of a public function. They also have a duty to make reasonable adjustments including changing practices, policies and procedures which have the effect of discriminating; and to take reasonable steps to enable disabled people to avoid substantial disadvantages caused by physical features. The Act also requires local authorities to provide information that is accessible for everyone.

Inclusive mobility

In November 2005 the Department of Transport published “Inclusive mobility – a guide to best practice on access to the pedestrian and transport infrastructure”. The aim of this guidance was to provide advice on best practice to assist professionals working in this field, and enable them to meet their responsibilities under the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 (DDA) (now the Equality Act). There is much in it for Highways Authorities to note. For example:

“Apart from roadworks and scaffolding, there are many other, sometimes temporary, obstructions that can cause problems for disabled people, particularly those with visual impairments. **A-frame advertisement boards placed outside shops, ladders, overhanging tree branches, dustbins, vehicles and bicycles parked on pavements** are all potential hazards.

Wherever feasible, obstructions of this kind **should be kept to a minimum** and should not encroach on the clear space (horizontal and vertical) needed to provide safe passage for pedestrians.”

Under the Equality Act Public Sector Equality Duty (PSED), public authorities, including highways authorities, are also required to have due regard to the need to eliminate discrimination under the Equality Act and, in order to advance the equality of opportunity between disabled and non disabled people. This means anyone responsible for looking after the street environment has a responsibility to eliminate and tackle problems that make a highway inaccessible for those with a disability. It is simply not an option to leave things as they are.



So if the law is clear, what's the problem?

It's clear to see that there are many existing laws which should protect the rights of blind and partially sighted people, enabling them to access their local environments, and help have a say in how they are altered. However, our research shows that most local authorities do not fully appreciate the impact their street and highway policies have on blind and partially sighted people. We believe, to meet their Equality Act requirements, local authorities should have a far better understanding of how their policies detrimentally affect blind and partially sighted people. They should consider what steps need to be taken to advance equality of opportunity for people living with sight loss.



Our freedom of information request discovered:

- There is a lack of formal processes for measuring the impact of policies on disabled people. This means local authorities do not know when they are making the street environment worse for blind and partially sighted people. As a result local authorities are missing out on expert advice and assistance to make streets more accessible.
- There is a failure to provide accessible information about building and street developments. This means that blind and partially sighted people are unaware of changes being proposed, and are denied the right to object or ask for disability access to be considered.

For example, we asked local authorities how they consulted with blind and partially sighted people about major planning developments. RNIB received responses like this:

“The council do not specifically consult any blind or partially sighted ‘group’. There is an expectation that designers of schemes will take into account the requirements of the blind and partially sighted.”

A North West council

“All applications are published on our website and a site notice is displayed on site for minor and major developments. This notice is printed on yellow paper with black writing.” **A South East council**

There seems to be a complete lack of understanding from some local authorities about the barriers blind and partially sighted people face when accessing standard information, such as site notices, leaflets or websites.

On a positive note, some local authorities did have good mechanisms for consulting with, and involving, disabled people. These included working with local access groups and other disability and sight loss organisations. These local authorities provided us with examples of how working in partnership had helped them make changes and improve disability access.



Conclusion: RNIB calls for three key changes

The day to day experiences, survey results and freedom of information findings all indicate the scale and nature of the problems faced by blind and partially sighted people. We are calling for three changes which we believe will have a significant and long term impact on making streets more accessible.

1 The government to review 2005 guidance called “Inclusive mobility: a guide to best practice on access to pedestrian and transport infrastructure”. We want provisions to be strengthened around highway obstructions, and existing legislation around the use of tactile paving, kerbs and crossings to be reinforced.

Guidance that was introduced by the Department for Transport ten years ago needs to be reviewed and strengthened. We know existing regulations around advertising boards (a-boards) and parking on pavements are not producing the desired results. We also know there is a growth in new types of development such as shared spaces, which have had a disproportionate impact on blind and partially sighted people. These phenomena need to be addressed. Strengthened and improved guidance will send a clear signal to local authorities about what is, and what is not, acceptable.

2 Local authorities to engage with local blind and partially sighted people to develop a street charter that puts a clear highway policy at the heart of their local decision making.

Local authorities have a duty to consult with residents but we know in many cases the most common engagement tools and techniques do not allow blind and partially sighted people to get involved. This is especially true when it comes to the built environment and issues to do with the highway. A charter that is developed in partnership with blind and partially sighted people will enable decision making to be more informed and more responsive to the needs of blind and partially sighted people. The charter needs to be flexible enough to take into account the local geography, characteristics and features of an area, but shaped with the understanding of people who rely upon tactile crossings, kerbs and use navigation aids such as canes and guide dogs. Only this sort of engagement will empower residents and help tackle some of the injuries, anxiety and isolation that blind and partially sighted people face on a day to day basis.

3 Local authorities to review their policies in relation to the six most common obstacles facing blind and partially sighted people.

The six most common obstacles to independent and safe movement are parking on pavements, a-boards, inaccessible crossings, bins and recycling boxes on pavements, street furniture, and developments that include shared space without kerbs, tactile paving and safe crossing points. Those who have an impact on the design and enforcement of the street environment in relation to those six issues, are having a negative impact on blind and partially sighted people.

Local authorities cannot make informed decisions on the built environment unless they understand the impact of these obstacles on people with sight loss, and many local authority staff, residents and businesses are confused by the current lack of consistency on these issues. There needs to be clear policies that are available and accessible to all. These policy statements would help inform decision making at a local level, as well as starting to address some of the inequality resulting from different local authorities taking alternative approaches to some of the most common problems.

If these three changes are delivered at a national and local level we will see decision makers better informed, and hopefully policy that will take into account the impact everyday obstructions have on those with sight loss.

Where circumstances are appropriate RNIB is calling for a world where pavements are clear of advertising boards and parked cars; crossings are accessible with rotating cones, audible beeps and the correct tactile paving; local authorities work with waste collection staff to keep bins and recycling boxes off pavements as much possible; and finally any new developments have kerbs, safe crossing points and tactile paving. These changes will be a step toward making our streets accessible and fewer blind and partially sighted people saying **“Who put that there!”**.

References

- [1] The methodology to the survey and freedom of information request can be found in the Appendix.
- [2] Over 500 blind and partially sighted people took our survey during the summer of 2014. Their answers are based on their experiences in the three months preceding when they took the survey. Our Freedom of Information request was issued on 29 April, 106 local authorities provided us with answers.



Appendix

RNIB has received an increasing number of complaints from blind and partially sighted people about how dangerous and difficult it is to get around their local neighbourhoods and town centres. As a result, we ran a survey from 17 May to 1 September 2014, on the street environment, which over 500 people with sight loss completed. The survey has given us vital evidence on just how the current street environment impacts on blind and partially sighted people's lives. Just walking to the shops or to the bus stop to get to work is a "daily assault course" of risks for the hundreds of thousands of people living with sight loss in the UK.

Over the last year, as well as running the survey, we have met with blind and partially sighted people at forums and workshops across England to discuss these issues. We also held a number of teleconferences with our campaigners asking them to share their experience of getting around, and campaigning for change.

Alongside this, we made a freedom of information request (FOI), asking local authorities in England a number of questions about their policies which have a direct effect on how blind and partially sighted people get around on foot. We found that there was little consistency in approach to these issues across England. Crucially, we discovered a complete lack of understanding on how to engage with blind and partially sighted people about these important "built environment" issues. In the last five years, it appears that no local authorities have provided information about planning consultation or decisions in accessible formats such as large print, email or braille.

To accompany our findings, during the autumn of 2014, we ran a survey aimed at those without sight loss. The vast majority of those who completed the survey shared the same concerns as those with sight loss regarding street clutter, dangerous roads and new developments.



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