



COVID-19 Living in a Lockdown: the experiences of London's sight loss community

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Executive Summary

At the Vision Foundation, our mission is to make London a shining example of a sight loss aware city. We work to transform the lives of people facing or living with sight loss by funding projects which inform, empower and include.

As London went into lockdown, we wanted to find out the impact on blind and partially sighted people and sight loss organisations in the capital, to ensure we can do the best for them in line with our goals. Between 30 March and 12 April 2020, just one week into the UK Government lockdown, the Vision Foundation contacted 19 organisations that provide support to London's visually impaired communities and carried out 10 in-depth interviews with blind and partially sighted people, aged between 25 and 80.

Summary

At a time when London is in lockdown, blind and partially sighted people are experiencing the isolation and anxiety of this even more acutely. Their ability to buy food and supplies, work from home, stay connected with friends and family, take exercise and maintain independence has been hugely hindered by the COVID-19 restrictions. Last year (2019) we found that loneliness and mental health difficulties were significant issues for blind and partially sighted people, when we undertook the research that underpins [our strategy](#). Those feelings are now compounded by the current context.

Key Challenges

The key challenges in the current crisis are that:

- London's blind and partially sighted people are facing exclusion, isolation and anxiety compounded by the COVID-19 crisis
- Key services, like shopping deliveries, are not available to blind and partially sighted people
- Social distancing means support to blind and partially sighted people is not available, reinforcing isolation
- Lockdown has diminished or taken away people's sense of autonomy and independence, leaving them reliant on patchy support
- Younger blind and partially sighted people, particularly if living on their own, are feeling the loss of control and isolation more acutely
- Delays in securing relevant technology and support for homeworking are increasing stress.



"The greatest impact of all is the loss of independence and loss of control"

(Working Single in 20s)

The Response

There have been many positive responses to the crisis but they are patchy and inconsistent:

- Some local shops and services have gone above and beyond
- Many organisations have adapted their services to become telephone-based, and are pro-actively contacting people at home to offer support
- There are some creative and positive examples of local sight loss organisations working differently and using technology to support blind and partially sighted people through this situation
- Social media contact through services like WhatsApp can help reduce isolation.

What is the Vision Foundation doing?

We are standing side by side with the wider sight loss sector in London and re-shaping our support and funding to organisations supporting the visually impaired community in London.

- ⇒ We have committed £100K to the [London Community Response Fund](#) to ensure that charities that support blind and partially sighted people have the money they need to adapt their services and work in new and innovative ways. This follows significant funding for local sight loss organisations including through our Vision Fund in March 2020.
- ⇒ We have already made available a range of resources and information to sight loss organisations in London via our website and other support, and will continue to assess how best we can support the sector as a progressive funder including by connecting and sharing best practice, briefings and webinars.
- ⇒ We are offering free fundraising and income generation information, advice and hands on support for small, local sight loss charities with limited resources to ensure that they can access emergency funding opportunities where possible.
- ⇒ We are amplifying the voices of the sight loss community in London by sharing their stories of life during lockdown through our social media campaign #BlindLockdownLife.
- ⇒ We are working with other sight loss organisations (at a national and city-wide level) to raise awareness of what needs to change for blind and partially sighted people in the capital, including recently sending a joint letter with RNIB to the Mayor of London.

Through this insight and in other ways, we will continue to work with blind and partially sighted people and amplify their voices to ensure their needs are met now, in the coming months and beyond.

Full Report

Introduction

Between 30 March and 12 April 2020, just one week into the UK Government lockdown, the Vision Foundation contacted 19 organisations that provide support to London's visually impaired communities and carried out 10 in-depth interviews with blind and partially sighted people, aged between 25 and 80.

This briefing brings together the experiences of those individuals and documents how the sight loss sector is adapting its work to support the visually impaired community.

At a time when London is in lockdown and Londoners are feeling the effects of being separated from friends, family and their normal routines - blind and partially sighted people are experiencing this even more acutely. Their ability to buy food and supplies, work from home, stay connected with friends and family, take exercise and maintain independence has been hugely hindered by the COVID-19 restrictions. This is having a profound impact on mental and physical health as blind and partially sighted people fight to navigate their way through this crisis.

How has the COVID-19 crisis affected blind and partially sighted people?

The overwhelming experience is exclusion, isolation, anxiety and fear:

- Exclusion from essential support services *"I usually buy online but there are no slots, they don't prioritise visually impaired people"*
- Isolation, anxiety and mental health *"I have a lot of anxiety due to the quiet around me, especially in the evenings"*
- In addition, there was fear of catching the virus *"I just can't see people, so there is no hope of me social distancing"*.

Last year (2019) we found that loneliness and mental health difficulties were significant issues for blind and partially sighted people, when we undertook the research that underpins [our strategy](#). Those feelings are now compounded by the current context.

What are the main challenges presented by the COVID-19 Crisis?

Exclusion from essential support services like shopping

With lockdown in force and blind and partially sighted people not included in the government's vulnerable category¹ the basic supply of food and supplies has been severely restricted. Individuals have been unable to secure food delivery slots with the supermarkets and face challenges shopping independently.

For older people local organisations have stepped in providing food deliveries and care packages. One organisation contacted said they were now providing supermarket shopping for up to 120 people a week, alongside hot meals. But younger people tend to be less connected with local community support groups and have not been able to access the help.

Individuals told us help from neighbours is patchy, not always reliable and unpredictable. Leaflets from well-meaning organisations posted through the letterbox are inaccessible (if you do not have someone to read them to you, for example) and offers of help on Facebook are not reaching the digitally excluded.

"The neighbours are not being helpful, that's London, nobody is doing my shopping" (Working in 30s)

"I have no idea what I am buying. There is apprehension around coming near me, there is so much fear" (Working in 30s)

"I am vulnerable but not vulnerable enough, for a week and a half I had no way to get food, that was really frightening" (Working in 20s)

"I can't read notes through the door, and mutual aid groups are on Facebook which I don't use" (Older Respondent)

Isolation, anxiety and mental health

Organisations told us the main challenge facing blind and partially sighted people in their community was the impact of ongoing isolation. In many cases the face to face services provided by sight loss charities are the main form of social contact each week. Due to the challenges of social distancing and the impracticalities of navigating without any form of touch, low vision means avoiding other people becomes an impossibility.

¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/guidance-on-shielding-and-protecting-extremely-vulnerable-persons-from-covid-19/guidance-on-shielding-and-protecting-extremely-vulnerable-persons-from-covid-19>

"The isolation is pushing me back in terms of my rehabilitation, I was starting to go out on my own, I am now back to zero" (Working in 20s)

"I am having trouble sleeping, I never normally struggle with insomnia, I also have loss of appetite due to the anxiety." (Working in 20s)

"I have no happiness during the day. Training had to stop so my anxiety went up, if I could see, I could go for a run to help manage my anxiety" (Working in 30s)

While older blind and partially sighted people are usually involved with local organisations it is those of working age - who may not have family support around them - who are missed as they are not connected with services in their local community. For younger people the lockdown has taken away their independence and increased their reliance on friends and volunteer-run organisations. The ability to exercise has been cited by many as a huge frustration as social distancing means they can no longer walk or run with a guide.

For working blind and partially sighted people the move to being home-based has come with additional challenges. Individuals reported facing delays in getting the software and technology they needed to do their jobs, as well as losing the support of sighted assistants which has contributed towards increased stress levels.

"To have control over your life is really important, having the control taken away is really stressful"

"The loss of independence is the hardest thing" (Older Respondent)

What is helping?

At a community-level individuals reported that some shops had gone above and beyond to provide support. One shopkeeper offered to empty his shop of customers to allow a blind man to do his shopping, while another small business is delivering food for free on trust of later payment because they don't take online payments.

All organisations contacted have adapted their services to be telephone based – most commonly switching in-person befriending to telephone calls. Just under half are using online video conferencing to connect with their community members – running online quizzes, cooking classes, music lessons and wellbeing workshops.

Most organisations have proactively reached out to their databases to ascertain the needs of their members and determine who requires regular check-in calls or could be considered as vulnerable.

"We have a Saturday morning sing on WhatsApp, I can't see anybody but the contact is nice" (Retired Respondent)

"I miss our lunch club but every Thursday volunteers go out and get our food and shopping" (73-year-old woman)

"I have a blind club on WhatsApp, we are ten visually impaired people in London, this has helped hugely, we discuss how to get around problems" (Working in 20s)

How have organisations adapted?

With face to face activities no longer practical, organisations have turned to technology and adapted their approaches to stay in touch with their community members and provide a continued service. Examples include:

- The Amber Trust has been trialling musical workshops via video links; so far these have been successful and ensures they can schedule more workshops in a day (as there is no travel time).
- BlindAid are linking with optometrists at leading hospitals such as Moorfields so that those requiring medical support are not falling off the radar and able to access appointments.
- Croydon Vision are offering an IT at home service, setting up social networking access and tips in using the internet for shopping for food.
- Disability Advice Service Lambeth has adapted their radio programme, so blind and partially sighted can send in recordings from home which are then edited by the team.
- Look UK has a younger demographic and has organised a number of online hangouts, family quizzes, music events, wellbeing workshops and Netflix parties.
- Sense have used private Facebook groups to set weekly activities for children to do at home.
- The children's services team at Sight for Surrey are using Zoom and Skype to connect people together. Team member, Carol, is now running online "Cooking with Carol" sessions as well as using Skype/Facetime to support a young woman with her white cane training, live guiding her around local streets.
- Time and Talents is sending out tailored activity packs including games and competitions to enter.
- Two organisations are looking at investing in personal protection equipment (PPE) so that they can start carrying out face to face services safely.

Summary

The challenges

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The response

- Some local shops and services have gone above and beyond, but the response is patchy and inconsistent
- Many organisations have adapted their services to become telephone-based, and are pro-actively contacting people at home to offer support
- There are some creative and positive examples of local sight loss organisations working differently and using technology to support blind and partially sighted people through this situation
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What is the Vision Foundation doing?

We are standing side by side with the wider sight loss sector in London and will use these insights as we consider how to shape our support and funding to organisations supporting the visually impaired community in London in the short, medium and long term.

- ⇒ We have committed £100K to the [London Community Response Fund](#) to ensure that charities that support blind and partially sighted people have the money they need to adapt their services and work in new and innovative ways. This follows significant funding for local sight loss organisations including through our Vision Fund in March 2020.
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Notes:

Methodology

- 19 organisations working with the sight loss community were contacted between 30th March and 9th April to set out their initial reaction and responses to the COVID-19 crisis. Organisations ranged from large national charities to small volunteer-run services. In addition, many of the organisations surveyed were pan-disability or had a defined geographic or demographic remit.
- 10 in-depth interviews were carried out with blind and partially sighted individuals between the 2nd and 12th April. Half of the interviewees were of working age, between 25 and 55, with 3 living alone and 2 with family. The remaining half were either retired or non-working aged between 60 and 80, with 3 living alone and 2 living with family. The interviews were focused on understanding the experiences of blind and partially people, both physical and emotional, during this coronavirus lockdown period.

The Vision Foundation

The [Vision Foundation](#) is an independent charity that exists to improve the opportunities, wellbeing and inclusion for blind and partially sighted people across London.

Empowerment is at the heart of what we do; our work focuses on what people can do, rather than what they can't. Since being established in 1921 more than £30m has been awarded to sight loss organisations that work to inform, include and empower London's visually impaired community.