

## Homes and living spaces for people with sight loss:

A guide for interior  
designers

October 2014



## Introduction

As an interior designer I have always firmly believed that good design is about enhancing and improving how people live. Simple design choices such as the correct paint colour can make an enormous difference to someone with sight loss. Having worked in care home design, I had always been aware of the importance of colour and finish for visually impaired people but the significance of this was hammered home to me in November 2012 when I permanently lost the sight in my left eye. While recovering from the trauma I determined that I would in some way combine my disability with my profession. When I met Sarah Buchanan, Research Director for Thomas Pocklington Trust, at the Care Show in 2013, we agreed there was a need to promote good practice in the interior design community. This prompted the project to produce a Guide on design and lighting for interior designers.

Good design of living environments and well-considered lighting reduce the risk of accidents, promote safety and independence and improve quality of life. With an ageing population, good design in all housing is a key consideration. This Guide aims to assist interior designers who are involved in:

- the design or refurbishment of residential and nursing homes
- the design of extra care housing and mainstream housing developments
- adaptations to existing properties for individuals and families



Jacqui Smith

*The Guide draws on material from a range of Pocklington research publications on design and lighting. See 'References and useful resources' at the end of this Guide.*

# Contents

page

Acknowledgements

2

Sight loss is more common than you think

3

Key design principles

4

Lighting

8

Colour and contrast guidelines

10

Dementia-friendly design

12

Designing for specific areas

Entrances, hallways, stairs and landings

14

Living areas

15

Kitchens

16

Bathrooms and WCs

17

Bedrooms

18

Appendix - lighting levels

19

References and useful resources

20



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**Author:** Jacqui Smith

## About the author

Jacqui is founder and co-director of HomeSmiths Ltd., a family-run interior design practice. Her experience over the past twelve years comprises a varied portfolio of residential, show home and care home projects. In November 2012 Jacqui permanently lost the vision in her left eye and has used her experiential knowledge of visual impairment in her care home projects. She sits on the SBID Healthcare Panel to advise on design guidelines for visually impaired people.

Jacqui's care home work includes projects for West Kent Housing Association, Broadham Care, Graham Care, Age Concern and St Peter & St James Hospice. She has also worked with Barratt David Wilson for the past four years, designing and installing their show homes in the south-east of England, and she has broad experience in residential design.

## About Thomas Pocklington Trust

Thomas Pocklington Trust is a national charity dedicated to delivering positive change for people affected by sight loss.

Research is central to Pocklington's work. We fund and collaborate on social and public health research initiatives aimed at identifying practical ways to improve the lives of people with sight loss, and seek to influence the services and facilities that they use.

Pocklington's research priorities are:

- the health and wellbeing of people with sight loss
- housing and environments that support the independence of people with sight loss
- building the capacity of organisations and services that work with people with sight loss to shape research and make use of research findings

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# Sight loss is more common than you think

In the same way that physical ability slows as people get older, vision deteriorates with age. From the age of 40 most people will notice a decline in the ability to focus and they will need more light as they carry out normal everyday tasks, such as reading and cooking.

Statistics show that around 1.87 million people in the UK live with sight loss that affects their day to day living. Sight loss affects people of all ages but especially older people – 1 in 5 people aged 75 and 1 in 2 aged 90 and over. With an ageing population, prevalence figures will increase and by 2050 the number of people with sight loss in the UK could be nearly four million.

There are some key eye conditions that affect people in the UK. The most common are age-related macular degeneration, glaucoma, diabetic retinopathy and cataract.

How people cope with their sight loss, whatever the cause, will depend on the nature of the condition, their age, and how quickly they lost their sight. Progressive conditions allow the brain to adjust gradually, while trauma resulting in immediate sight loss may result in the person taking longer to adapt.

Degrees of sight loss vary and relatively few people have no vision at all. Good design will help maximise what functional vision people have, and flexible design will ensure that they can adjust their surroundings to suit their particular condition.

**Good design of the living environment reduces the risk of accidents**



# Key design principles

It is important to start with the principle of inclusive design. Making an environment suitable for someone with sight loss does not mean that it should stand out as different from one designed for people with good vision. Design features should not be immediately obvious and should cater for the needs of someone with sight loss while also sitting comfortably with the surroundings. Good design and improved lighting will benefit everyone.

## Function and purpose

Understanding the function and purpose of a space and the needs of the person living in it is fundamental to all design. This is no different when designing for people with sight loss. Applying the person-centred approach to interior design will ensure that people feel involved as much or as little as they want to be and that they will feel less daunted by the prospect of change. Focusing on the users of the space and their varying needs requires flexible design solutions which individuals can adapt to suit their particular condition and circumstances. For new-build projects where specific needs might not be known at the start of the design process, working with focus groups, including both professionals and people with sight loss, can prove extremely useful.

## Layout

Furniture and equipment should be logically laid out, with plenty of space around it and with easy access to windows, radiators and electrical controls. Furniture should be easy to navigate around and assistive equipment should be easy to use but not clutter the space. Well-lit storage to support the function of the space should be incorporated into the design wherever possible, e.g. wardrobes, cupboards.

The regular-shaped rooms of new-build schemes provide good proportions and are easier to navigate and furnish. Many designers, however, find themselves working on conversion projects where the rooms can be long and narrow and lacking in natural light. The internal remodelling in the project shown in the 'before' and 'after' photographs involved removing the internal walls of a ground floor bedroom and creating a larger communal lounge space. The additional light afforded by changing what was the bedroom window to bi-fold doors to the garden makes a huge difference to the space.

## Making the most of natural light

Source: HomeSmiths. Photographer: Claire Goldsmith

### Before



### After



Communal living spaces, where the layout is repeated within the building, work best if certain features are repeated within the space, for instance the position of furniture in sub-lounges where these are located in the same place on each floor. In residential homes and extra care housing with communal areas, simple and logical layouts are easier to remember and will help to ensure that people who move in are able to settle quickly and readily develop a sense of independence. Consistency of approach should be applied to fixtures such as light switches, sockets, taps, doors and window handles. All handles should be comfortable to touch and operate, and the opening methods and position should be consistent throughout the building.

### **Light**

Maximising an individual's functional sight is the main objective when planning lighting schemes. Use of natural light is always a priority for interior designers and is especially significant when designing for people with sight loss. To this end, curtain poles and tracks should be fitted so that the curtains let in the maximum amount of daylight when pulled back. Vertical blinds are also a useful way of controlling the amount of daylight coming in to a room. Curtains and blinds should be easy to operate.

When installing artificial light, a combination of general (ambient) and task lighting will provide depth and warmth and ensure that the room feels homely. A good overall level of ambient lighting will minimise dark corners and shadows and an even and consistent level of light will make moving from room to room easier and safer.

Task lighting is essential for focused activities and to illuminate the inside of cupboards or wardrobes. All lamps should be positioned to avoid glare, which can be extremely disorienting to someone with sight loss. Given the variety of eye conditions, it is important to ensure that as much of the lighting as possible is dimmable and that it is switched and controlled separately to allow for individuals to adjust it to their own comfort. Specifying plenty of sockets will enable floor and table lamps to be moved to suit the needs of the person using the room and avoid trailing wires which might present a trip hazard.

Lighting is considered in more detail in the next section of the Guide.



**Use of under-cupboard lighting to facilitate kitchen tasks**

Source: Thomas Pocklington Trust



**Using wardrobe interior lighting to assist when choosing clothes**

Source: Thomas Pocklington Trust

## Colour and contrast

Contrasting colours and contrast between types of surfaces help people distinguish between an object and its surroundings. Contrast is achieved by a difference in the light reflectance value (LRV). LRV is the amount of visible light reflected by a surface when illuminated by a light source. The scale runs from 0 to 100 where 0 is a surface that fully absorbs light and 100 is a surface that fully reflects light. The minimum recommended contrast between two objects for someone with a visual impairment is 30 points of LRV difference. For flooring on the same level, contrast should be minimal i.e. little difference in LRV between changes in flooring type to avoid the appearance of steps or holes.

When designing for people with a visual impairment, good colour contrast between furniture, floors and walls will reduce trips and falls and encourage independence. It can also be used to highlight doorways and potential hazards such as the edges of doors and stairs, and to emphasise the position of appliances, sanitary fittings, handles, sockets and light switches.

Colour and contrast are considered in more detail in a later section of the Guide.

### Use of colour contrast around doors and flooring

Source: HomeSmiths.

Photographer: Claire Goldsmith







# Lighting

Lighting schemes should take into account the finishes on all main surfaces, allowing people to carry out tasks more easily in their home. The general ambient light should be even and should eliminate shadows, so that the eyes are able to adjust comfortably when moving from one task to another. Lighting controls should be easy to use and dimmable wherever possible to enable users to regulate the lighting to suit their own specific needs.

Light can sometimes actually make it harder to see. While visually impaired people require more light than most people to go about their daily routine, too much light can cause glare which makes it difficult to see properly. There are two types of glare: discomfort glare and disability glare. The best example of discomfort glare is the effect of moving from a dark room to bright sunlight. The dramatic change in light entering the eye causes us to screw up or shade our eyes and we feel discomfort while our eyes adjust. Disability glare results from reduced ability of the eye to react to changes in light and is caused by certain eye conditions, most commonly cataract.

All light sources, natural and artificial, are potential sources of glare, so appropriate shades and diffusers should be used. Vertical blinds are a useful way of controlling glare from sunlight and reflection on the glass from internal light sources. In addition, reflection from shiny surfaces can be a source of glare, so matt wall finishes are preferable. Satin finish metals are also preferable to shiny chrome or brass which might produce glare.

In summary, designers should aim to create an environment that maximises natural light, is free of glare, generates an even level of light and allows for easy adjustment and control of lighting sources and levels. The following summary of the characteristics of good lighting is the result of discussion with people with sight loss and professionals working with them. Lighting should be:

- **Appropriate for the individual**  
Visual impairments and how they affect an individual's ability to carry out day to day tasks will vary according to the eye condition. Flexible controls enable individuals to tailor their environment to suit their needs.



**A variety of light sources in a communal living area**

Source: HomeSmiths.  
Photographer: Claire Goldsmith



**Multiple light sources in the bathroom**

Source: Thomas Pocklington Trust

- **Sufficient for tasks, orientation and movement**  
Ambient and task lighting should combine to give the optimum level of light to meet individual needs. Designers should ensure higher levels on stairs and in kitchens to reduce the likelihood of accidents. The Lux, i.e. the intensity of light, required in a space will vary depending on the location and task. Guidance on Lux levels can be found in the Appendix.
- **Even and consistent across different areas, with minimum glare**  
Consistent light levels between rooms are required, with minimal shadow or glare. Glare can be minimised by shading lamps and positioning them so that the light bulb is not in normal view.
- **Adjustable for flexibility**  
Lighting should be planned on different circuits, easily switched and dimmable to cater for the varying needs of home residents and occupants, as well as their visitors or family members.
- **Energy efficient and sustainable**  
Designers should strive for the optimum use of energy when planning lighting, making the most of the available natural light and selecting appropriate lamps.
- **Simple to install, minimising disruption**  
Measures such as simple replacements to lamps, the addition of task lights or a change of wall colour or furniture layout can improve lighting provision dramatically without the disturbance caused by major work.
- **Adaptable for the future**  
Lighting installations should be designed so as to be easily altered to accommodate the changing needs of new occupants and innovations in lighting technology.

**Food preparation made easier in a well-lit kitchen area**

Source: Thomas Pocklington Trust



# Colour and contrast guidelines

It is important for designers to comply with the requirements of Part M of the Building Regulations. Part M covers 'Access to and use of buildings.' While the official requirements of Part M apply to publicly accessed buildings, designers should also consider applying the principles as good practice when designing for people with sight loss in their own homes.

The regulations include the requirement for a visual colour contrast of at least 30 LRV points for all critical surfaces (e.g. floor to wall, wall to door and floor to door) and fittings (e.g. door handles, light switches). This is to ensure that visually impaired people can clearly and easily identify where a critical surface begins and ends.

Designers also have to take account of duties under the Equality Act 2010 when advising clients. Good practice guidance on accessibility can be found in two recent British Standard documents: BS8300 on building design and BS9266 on accessible and adaptable housing.

See 'References and useful resources' for more information on Part M and British Standards.

Listed below are some of the more common surfaces and fittings to consider when applying colour and contrast principles:

- floor finish to skirting board
- skirting board to wall
- wall to door frame
- wall to handrail and light switch
- door frame to door
- door to door handle and/or lock

When selecting products and materials for these critical surfaces, designers must ensure that the LRV contrast of the materials fits within the regulations, or agree alternative provision with the building control body inspecting the work. Most companies publish the LRV for their products or make it available on request. The type of lighting needs to be taken into consideration as the way the space is lit can have an effect on the colours even if the correct LRV is used. For example, fluorescent lighting can make colours take on a bluish bias. This is known as 'colour rendering', which describes the effect of a light source on the colour appearance



**Good use of colour and contrast for door and entrance**

Source: Thomas Pocklington Trust

of objects as compared with their appearance under an ideal light or natural light.

An interior designer who understands colour and its subtleties should be able to find creative ways of meeting the challenges raised by the official regulations - and the needs of people with sight loss - without compromising the colour scheme.



**Colour contrast in seating area to indicate positioning of furniture**



**Colour contrast in bathroom to indicate critical surfaces**



**Colour contrast to assist way finding and indicate critical surfaces**

# Dementia-friendly design

Dementia is the term used to describe a range of symptoms including memory loss, deteriorating communication skills and impaired learning and reasoning. In 2012, it was estimated that 1 in 14 people over the age of 65 and 1 in 6 over the age of 80 had some form of dementia. Given the prevalence of sight loss in the older population, there will be many people living in the UK dealing with the challenge of both conditions.

People with dementia become more reliant on their senses as their memory and reasoning skills diminish; a visually impaired person will face a different set of challenges. The combination of both conditions is challenging to both the individual and their carers.

Recent research has shown that there are some differences, in terms of design that works best for someone with sight loss and design recommendations for someone with dementia. For example, while objects placed around the room can be important memory triggers for people with dementia, clutter and trip hazards should be avoided for those with poor sight. These differences, however, are far outweighed by the common principles of good inclusive design.

*'Good practice in the design of homes and living spaces for people living with dementia and sight loss'*, a study by Stirling University commissioned by Thomas Pocklington Trust, examined how home environments can be improved to support people with both dementia and sight loss.

The study reviewed existing research in this area and undertook consultation with a range of people, including those with sight loss and dementia, and professional stakeholders. The guidelines developed from the study highlighted the importance of colour and contrast, good lighting and a person-centred approach. The findings did not emphasise previously noted contradictions in design advice for people with dementia and people with sight loss. Instead, they indicated that choices about what is best should reflect individual needs and be carefully considered. The views of



people with dementia and sight loss and their carers should be central to this process.

A common challenge faced by interior designers when working in communal residential settings is addressing a 'multi-client' brief. The conclusion of the Stirling University study is that if a person-centred approach is at the heart of the service provider's philosophy, focusing on the needs of the individual, then any potential conflicts between design for sight loss and dementia should prompt interior designers to consider what is right for that person. In communal settings, there will always be challenges in addressing the needs of everyone using those spaces, emphasising again the importance of inclusive and flexible design.



### **Dementia-friendly design**

Source: The Drawing Room Interiors. Photographer: Paul Craig

# Designing for specific areas

This section of the Guide provides checklists of specific requirements for particular areas within a property or residential building. As this Guide covers mainstream housing, extra care housing and residential and nursing homes, the checklists include some items that are only applicable in one or two of these settings.

## Checklist: **Entrances, hallways, stairs and landings**

Getting in and out of your home safely and easily is something that most of us take for granted. For visually impaired people it can be fraught with problems and make them more reluctant to leave their home, affecting their independence and quality of life. The interior designer should consider how to provide and ensure clear, safe and uncluttered entrances and circulation routes with features that assist navigation, way finding and safe movement.

- Front doors should be painted in a colour that contrasts with the door surround and the surrounding wall.
- Lighting should be controlled at each end of a corridor and at the top and bottom of stairs.
- Steps should be clearly defined by contrast stair nosings with an LRV differentiation of 60 points (stair nosing is the front edge of the stair, where riser meets tread).
- Painting the adjacent walls a contrasting colour, or doing the same at the bottom edge of the wall close to the step, helps people to see where the stair ends and the wall begins.
- Open stair risers are dangerous and should not be used.
- Tactile flooring surfaces can work well in communal spaces to indicate the top or the bottom of the stairs.
- Handrails should be in a contrasting colour to the wall and fitted in continuous runs. They should be tactile and comfortable to touch with raised, and contrasting, studs marking where they end.
- There should be handrails on both sides of the stairs and when against a wall they should be extended for 300mm beyond the top and bottom of the stairs.

**Use of lighting and contrast in hallway and on stairs**





## Checklist: **Living areas**

People's degree of sight loss and other concurrent conditions, such as dementia, will vary and some people will require specialist assistive equipment. The interior designer has to understand how people use the space and where they would like to see improvements. The storage and lighting can then be planned to maximise ease of use. Understanding where people like to sit in the room, what types of hobbies they pursue and whether they use the space for paperwork will result in a space that works for them.

- Storage to serve the specific needs of the occupant should be considered, such as cupboards for hobby paraphernalia or filing space for paperwork.
- A permanent dining area should feature in the design.
- A dedicated workspace with space for a desk top computer and screen reader should be included in the design.
- Space for a guide dog's bed and equipment should be considered where relevant (although this may not be in the sitting room).
- Appropriately-positioned TV aerial as well as telephone and computer points to support internet connection, call system and telecare equipment should be included.



**An attractive and well designed living room**



# Designing for specific areas

## Checklist: **Kitchens**

The work triangle rule applies here as with all kitchen design, ensuring that the fridge, sink and hob are positioned in a logical sequence to enable easy movement for food preparation, cooking and serving. The layout is not just a practical consideration but a safety one; kitchens should be designed to provide a clear, well-lit and safe environment. With the ever-increasing range of materials available for kitchens and advances in lighting technology, interior designers should be able to bring together schemes that look great and are practical and easy to use.

- The arrangement should be logical and uncluttered, with easy access to all equipment.
- There should be at least two work surfaces, each a minimum 1200mm wide. These should be unbroken in all places where pots, pans and bowls will need to be moved. The sink should be close to the hob with between 400mm and 1200mm between them. There should be a minimum 400mm of clear work surface either side of the hob and a minimum 1200mm clearance in front of all appliances, base units and tall units.
- Open-ended worktops increase the likelihood of items being knocked off. Butting up the end of the work surface to an end wall or tall cupboard will prevent this.
- Patterned work tops should be avoided as they can be confusing.
- Cupboard doors left ajar can create a hazard. Alternative storage solutions include open shelving, sliding doors, hinged doors which open to 180 degrees and doors which close automatically. Eye-level cupboard doors should open no wider than the surface below. Bright, contrasting edge strips on the doors can also be useful.
- Storage should be easily accessible from a standing position. Carousels work well for corners and pull down compartments are useful for higher level storage.
- Wall cupboards should not be fitted over the sink, draining board or hob/cooker.
- Under-cabinet lighting is vital and additional task lighting should be considered for areas such as the hob.
- Shiny kitchen finishes can be a source of glare so wherever possible matt or satin finishes should be specified.
- Handles and controls should be accessible for all and should contrast with their background. Hot and cold labelling on taps should be obvious through clear tactile lettering.



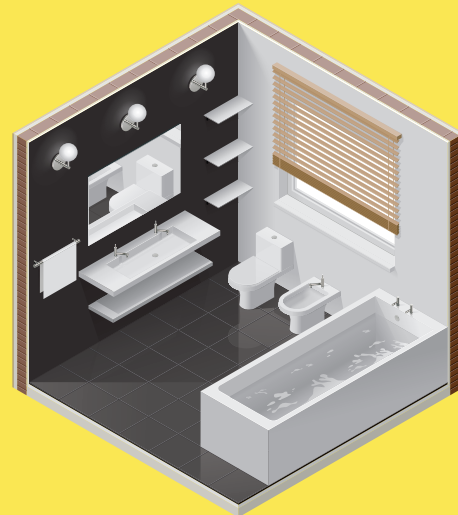
**Good use of design, contrast and lighting in a kitchen**



## Checklist: **Bathrooms and WCs**

The main consideration for an interior designer is to ensure that there is the simplest possible route between bedrooms and bathrooms. The bathroom should be adjacent to the main bedroom or en suite where feasible and should have a logical layout.

- Baths should have slip-resistant flat bottoms and recessed hand grips on both sides with a bath panel that contrasts in colour to the surroundings. Basins should be curved with no sharp corners; basin and bath plugs should be incorporated within the waste.
- Kitchen-style lever taps are recommended with the hot and cold clearly identifiable by touch, bold visual clues and contrast with the background. Safety temperature locks are recommended on showers to prevent accidental scalding.
- Toilets should be close coupled or incorporate a concealed cistern. Toilet seats should contrast with their background though red seats should be avoided as it might suggest heat or danger.
- Showers should be fully accessible with a flush floor draining gulley or a level grating over a recessed shower tray, both set into a non-slip floor material and in a contrast colour to surrounding surfaces. Shower heads and rails should not be shiny, should contrast with their background and should be accessible from a standing position and adjustable in height and direction. Shower curtains should contrast with the wall and the edge of shower screens should be clearly identifiable.
- Flush handles should be the large spatula type or large push buttons and should ideally have a tactile element to help them stand out from their background. Where grab rails are fitted they should contrast with the wall, have good grip and be matt or semi-matt in finish.
- Wall finishes should be fully tiled in a plain style with matt or semi-matt finish tiles. Contrasting tiles can be used to define boundaries and locations of fittings.
- Flooring should be water-tight, plain, non-slip and non-reflective. It should contrast with the wall and the wall should contrast with the ceiling. A coved skirting is required around the perimeter of wet areas including the edge of the bath.



**Contrast tiling and clearly marked taps for bathroom sink area**



# Designing for specific areas

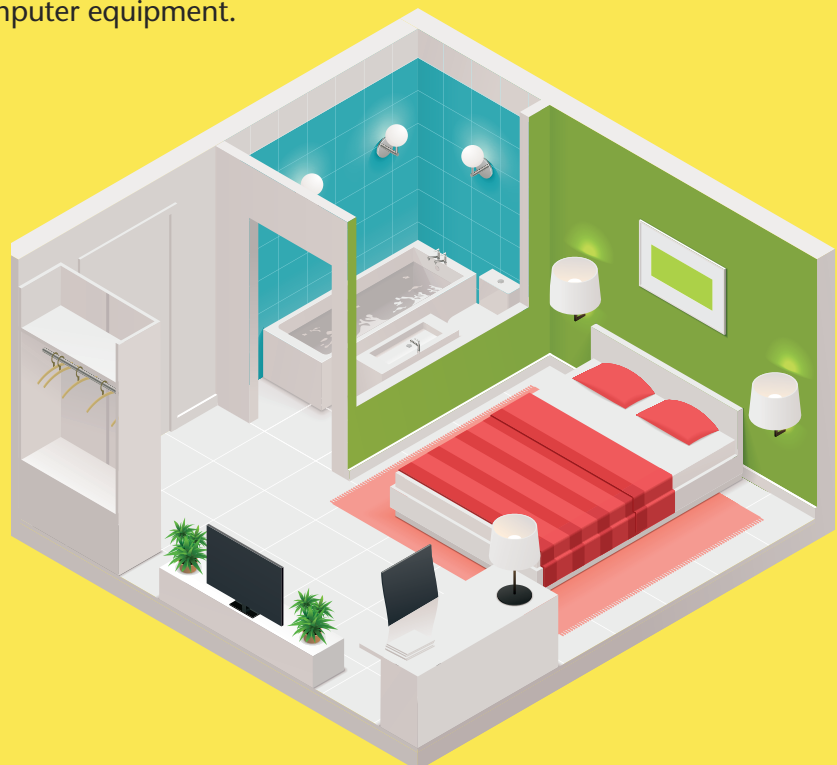
## Checklist: **Bedrooms**

Being able to dress yourself and care for your personal appearance is important to a sense of confidence and independence, which are at the core of the brief to the interior designer. People living with sight loss require a bedroom which enables them to move around the room confidently, especially at night. It should have well-designed storage space to minimise clutter and allow people to enjoy a clear and peaceful bedroom space.

- Bedrooms should be double rather than single and should have unobstructed access to a bathroom, where possible an en suite.
- There should be plenty of space around the bed to make getting in and out of bed as easy as possible. Access to wardrobes and dressing tables should be clear.
- Built-in wardrobes should be fitted with sliding doors. If this is not possible, care should be taken to ensure that the doors do not project into the room too much.
- Fitted wardrobes should feature switched interior lighting with a switch that contrasts with the carcass colour and which cuts out after a short period. The switch needs to be accessible but not in a position where it could be triggered by accident.
- The electrical layout should provide for points for call systems, television and computer equipment.



**Good use of colour contrast, lighting and design in bedroom**



# Appendix

## lighting levels

Recommended Lux levels on the floor (varied activities).

<b>Rooms in the home</b>	<b>Lux for people with sight loss</b>	<b>Minimum Lux for people with sight loss and dementia</b>
Hallway	100 – 300	300
Lounge/Dining	100 – 300	300
Kitchen	200 – 300	600
Bathroom	100 – 300	300
Bedroom	100 - 300	200
Stairs (on treads)	100 - 200	200
Corridors	100 - 200	150

### Recommended Lux levels for specific activities

The lower figure in the range is the minimum level recommended for someone with sight loss; the upper figure is the recommended level for someone with sight loss and dementia.

<b>Task definition</b>	<b>Examples of activity</b>	<b>Lux</b>
Routine	Showering/bathing/washing	100 - 300
	Brushing teeth	200 - 300
	Finding keys	100 - 300
Time-consuming	Reading/writing	200 - 1000
	Washing up or having a meal	200 - 500
Short and detailed	Selecting clothes (wardrobe/drawer)	100 - 200
	Using the telephone	100 - 400
	Putting on shoes	100 - 300
Requiring concentration and with risk	Cooking or making a cup of tea	200 - 1000
	Shaving	200 - 1000

Lux is the unit of illuminance (measure of the density of light falling on a surface). As shown, a person with sight loss may need up to 1000 Lux to undertake some tasks in the home. Light meters, more correctly called illuminance meters, are used to measure the amount of light falling on a given plane (e.g. floor or table).



# References and useful resources

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Thomas Pocklington Trust, (2014) Housing for people with sight loss: A practical guide to improving existing homes, Good Practice Guide 4 (3rd edition)

Part M of the Building Regulations (updated 2013):

<http://www.planningportal.gov.uk/buildingregulations/approveddocuments/partm/approved>

British Standard 8300 is a code of practice on building design and the needs of disabled people.

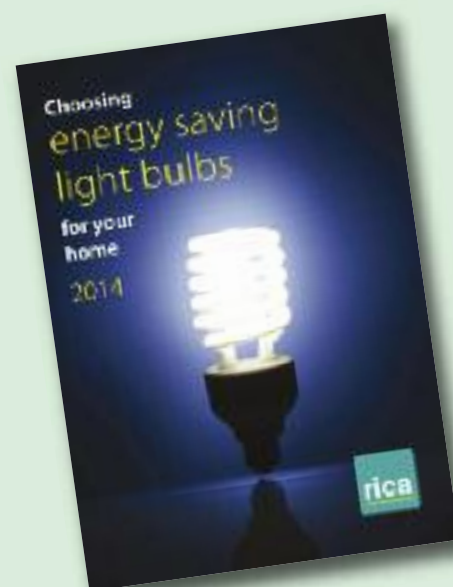
Web: <http://www.standardsuk.com>

British Standard 9266 is a code of practice on design of accessible and adaptable general needs housing.

Web: <http://www.standardsuk.com>

The National Register of Access Consultants is an independent register of accredited Access Auditors and Access Consultants. It is a resource for those seeking professional advice on how to develop and achieve inclusive environments in accordance with the Equality Act 2010 and Part M of the Building Regulations.

Web: <http://www.nrac.org.uk>



**1 in 8 people aged 75 and over  
will experience severe sight loss**





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