

Listening Month 2022

Creating the perfect world for blind and partially sighted people



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Summary

In November 2022, Thomas Pocklington Trust and Sight Loss Councils launched Listening Month 2022, a major engagement project to learn about the experiences of blind and partially sighted people.

Through an online survey, engagement events, and other channels, the initiative gathered feedback on matters that are important to this community.

A total of 1,037 blind or partially sighted individuals shared their experiences and opinions, with 70% of responses collected through the online survey and the remaining 30% from face-to-face or online events.

The project aimed to identify key priorities and themes and promote understanding in order to create a more accessible and equal world for those with visual impairments.

This report on Listening Month 2022 analyses qualitative and quantitative data gathered from the survey and engagement events. It highlights key challenges faced by blind and partially sighted individuals including:

- Accessibility of the street environment
- Public transport
- Awareness of visual impairment
- Employment and benefits
- Personal confidence and social isolation

- Accessibility of retail and other services
- Accessibility of technology
- Health and care
- and education and learning.

The report also breaks down responses by region, revealing the specific challenges faced by visually impaired people in each area. The findings from Listening Month closely align with those identified in the VI Lives report, published last year.

We'd like to thank all those who took part in Listening Month events or helped us to organise them.

Listening Month 2022 successfully identified key areas of concern for the blind and partially sighted community, offering insights that can be used to promote understanding and effect change.



What matters most to blind and partially sighted people?

By design, Listening Month 2022 was intended to capture both qualitative and quantitative responses. We have analysed the responses from both face-to-face and online engagement and surveys to identify the key themes and priorities that emerged.

There was also strong alignment between these priorities and those identified through the VI Lives report published in September 2022.

In the following sections we will examine each of these issues in turn and highlight the key issues mentioned by participants in Listening Month 2022.

The report also includes a regional breakdown of responses, although there was relatively little variation in the issues highlighted, particularly through the national survey.



Accessibility of the street environment

– highlighted by approximately 75% of participants



Accessibility and availability of public transport -
approx. 65%



Awareness of visual impairment

- approx. 45%



Getting and keeping employment and benefits

- approx. 40%



Personal confidence and social isolation

– approx. 35%



Accessibility of retail and other services

– approx. 30%



Access to technology

– approx. 30%



Access to health and care

– approx. 25%



Access to education and learning

– less than 10%

Accessibility of the street environment

Accessibility of the street environment is crucial for blind and partially sighted people as it ensures safety, independence, and mobility. Well-designed streets with clear, unobstructed paths, tactile paving, and audible traffic signals allow visually impaired individuals to navigate confidently and comfortably. Improving street accessibility not only enhances quality of life but also fosters inclusion and equal opportunities for participation in daily activities and community life.

- Street obstacles were a real deterrent to people and cause of accidents e.g. A Boards, overhanging vegetation, poorly placed street furniture.
- E-scooters / bicycles being ridden inappropriately and leading to injury or nervousness about using an area.
- Pavement quality was an issue for many people with pedestrian journeys negatively impact by pavement surface quality.
- Pavement parking was a concern with lack of local action.
- Accessible crossings were generally positive but complaint that often not enough of them or not fully functioning.

“Is it too much to ask that I can go out of my front door and not be constantly worried because someone has been thoughtless - left a bin out, a car door open, parked on a pavement? People don’t realise how these unnecessary obstacles make such a difference to me.”

Rupa, South West

Accessibility and availability of public transport

Accessibility and availability of public transport are essential for blind and partially sighted people as it promotes their independence, mobility, and social inclusion. Ensuring that transport systems like buses, trains, and taxis are user-friendly, with features like audio announcements, tactile signage, and trained staff, enables visually impaired individuals to travel confidently and safely. Ultimately, accessible public transport fosters equal opportunities, allowing blind and partially sighted people to actively participate in work, education, and community events.

- Lack of audio announcements on buses or effectiveness of bus timetable information or apps.
- Mixed experience of passenger assistance services on rail services with support not always available or delivered.
- Accessibility of booking services mixed, particularly when using apps and for ticketing.
- Reliability of bus and rail services was a frequent complaint, adding to the uncertainty of an already stressful journey. Very difficult to respond flexibly to delays/cancellations when you have a VI.

“Transport is a lifeline for me as I have been blind from birth. It needs to be reliable and accessible. I’d love audio announcements on buses and more taxi drivers who understand VI!”

Steve, South West

Awareness of visual impairment

Raising awareness of visual impairment among the general public and service providers is vital for fostering empathy, understanding, and inclusive practices. Greater awareness leads to better support, accessible services, and accommodating environments for blind and partially sighted individuals. By understanding the challenges faced by this community, the public and service providers can work collaboratively to create a more inclusive society, enabling visually impaired individuals to participate fully in everyday life and reach their full potential.

- A lack of awareness of visual impairment was a key theme mentioned by many people with a particular emphasis on general public awareness.
- People highlighted a lack of help and engagement because people didn't know what to do.
- This was perceived as being an issue that cut across a number of areas including health, retail, transport, employment etc.

“I don't think people are trying to make my life harder, but they end up doing so by not thinking! Thoughtless behaviour like pavement parking or not cutting back your hedge can mean injuries for me. Worse than that, it can mean I don't go out at all. We need sighted people to know about and understand the challenges we face and be our friends in changing the world.”

Zack, London

Getting and keeping employment and benefits

Securing and maintaining employment, as well as access to social security benefits, is crucial for blind and partially sighted people in the UK. Stable employment enhances their self-esteem, independence, and social integration. Meanwhile, social security benefits provide vital financial support, ensuring a decent standard of living and access to necessary services. Together, these factors contribute to the well-being and quality of life of visually impaired individuals, promoting social equity and inclusive opportunities for all.

- Regular complaint that attitudes and understanding of employers is poor and a lack of knowledge about support available
- Concern about complexity of Access to Work and generally poor knowledge of the specialist equipment available to enable VI people to secure jobs.
- Benefits claims process was cited by many people as being complex and inaccessible.

“It would be a dream of mine to have a job. A secure job. I really believe that in a sense a career gives you a purpose and provides a sense of achievement. Too many visually impaired people are locked out of employment by a lack of awareness and flexibility.”

Alex, North East

Personal confidence and social isolation

Boosting personal confidence and combating social isolation are essential for blind and partially sighted people in the UK. Confidence empowers people to engage in daily activities, develop meaningful relationships, and advocate for their own needs. Tackling social isolation strengthens emotional well-being and fosters a sense of belonging. By addressing these issues, visually impaired individuals can lead fulfilling lives, actively participate in their communities, and contribute positively to society, promoting a more inclusive and diverse environment.

- Confidence to go out and about when newly diagnosed was mentioned as a barrier – with delays to getting support not helping.
- Feeling of isolation from services and friendship networks. Many reported finding themselves housebound, at least initially, and consequently losing natural networks.
- Mixed experience of accessing leisure and sports facilities with some very complimentary and others reporting “none exist for VI”.

“As an older person my sight loss has come as a big shock. I’ve stopped going to groups and cannot go and see my friends as easily as before and it is really leaving me isolated. I’m a bit lost as to what to do about it.”

Donald, Wales

Accessibility of retail and other services

The accessibility of retail and other services is vital for blind and partially sighted people in the UK, as it ensures their autonomy, equality, and participation in everyday life. Providing accessible services, including user-friendly websites, tactile signage, and staff training, empowers visually impaired individuals to shop, access entertainment, and utilise public services confidently. Enhancing accessibility ultimately fosters social inclusion and guarantees that visually impaired people enjoy equal opportunities to participate in society.

- General complaint about lack of staff awareness in service/retail settings.
- Design of shopping and hospitality environments often poor e.g. lighting, crowded, no natural walk routes or ways to access help.
- Mixed experience of online offer with some apps/websites commended and others offering a poor experience.
- A frequent issue was people's mixed experience of access with a Guide Dog.

“I would love to be able to access a large variety of sport, concerts, theatres, places of worship, art exhibitions and shops. I'd love to have the confidence that when I go out to use services I don't have to play a lottery where I don't know what support I will get or what the experience will be like.”

Ramesh, London

Accessibility of technology

Accessible technology plays a pivotal role in empowering blind and partially sighted people, enhancing their independence, productivity, and social inclusion. Innovations such as screen readers, magnification software, and voice-controlled devices enable visually impaired individuals to access information, communicate, and navigate the digital world with ease.

In today's technology-driven society, it is crucial that tech developers prioritise accessibility and inclusivity, ensuring that their products cater to the needs of those with visual impairments. By embracing accessible technology, we help level the playing field, allowing blind and partially sighted individuals to fully participate in educational, professional, and social settings, ultimately enriching their lives and the wider community.

- Mixed views on technology with many saying it was a game changer and others saying it was unaffordable/inaccessible.
- Big difference across ages with older people more likely to express frustration.

“Technology has changed my life for the better, but with all the advances I am still left behind too often. Why cannot more tech be accessible by design? Friends tell me try this app or online portal, but often it won't do voiceover or work with a screen reader. Tech is supposed to make life easier, but too often it doesn't.”

Rebecca, South East

Accessibility of health and care

Accessible health and care services are crucial for blind and partially sighted people, as they ensure equal access to vital support, treatment, and resources necessary for their well-being. By providing clear signage, audio descriptions, Braille materials, and trained staff, healthcare providers can deliver effective, inclusive care to visually impaired individuals.

Accessible services enable people to confidently manage their health, seek timely intervention, and engage in health-promoting activities. Furthermore, inclusive health and care services contribute to reducing disparities in health outcomes and quality of life for those with visual impairments, promoting a more equitable society that values and supports the needs of all its members.

- Accessible health information was a key concern under the health and care theme with very few people expressing positive experience.
- Point of diagnosis support e.g. ECLO, health advice, early intervention support.
- Availability of rehab services e.g. mobility, aids and equipment, home help.

“Everything should be accessible to VI people these days, but especially health information. I am missing appointments – which are hard enough to get – because I cannot read the letters. It is so frustrating and must cost the NHS a fortune in missed appointments.”

Jacqui, North West

Access to education and learning

Accessible education and learning are paramount for blind and partially sighted people in the UK, as they form the foundation for personal development, social inclusion, and future opportunities.

Ensuring educational environments are equipped with adaptive technologies, Braille materials, and supportive teaching staff allows visually impaired students to thrive and reach their full potential.

Accessible education empowers them to build essential skills, pursue higher education, and secure meaningful employment. By promoting inclusive learning experiences, we nurture a diverse and equitable society, in which all individuals, regardless of their visual abilities, can contribute meaningfully and achieve their aspirations.

- Due to the demographics of the participants, we received very little feedback on access to education.
- We ran a separate survey and focus group aimed at young people and students which picked up very similar themes to the main Listening Month activity.

- There was strong emphasis amongst young people on the importance of accessibility of education and particularly around understanding and awareness, access to technology and having support needs met quickly.

“I want to succeed in my life and get a great job and that means getting educated and going to uni. I am worried that after my A Levels I won't get the support I need to continue my education. I know so many blind people who've fallen between the cracks as they've left home.”

Fran, Midlands

Young people and students

For blind and partially sighted children and young people in the UK, key priorities include accessible and inclusive education, early intervention services, and social opportunities.

Providing tailored learning environments, adaptive technologies, and trained teachers allows them to develop skills and knowledge essential for their future success. Timely access to specialised support and therapy enables them to address developmental needs and fosters independence.

Additionally, promoting social engagement and accessible extracurricular activities fosters emotional well-being, confidence, and a sense of belonging. By prioritising these aspects, we empower visually impaired youth to reach their full potential and contribute positively to society.

- Family and friends, mental health, anti-discrimination and doing things to their full ability came out as important things to young people. The general lack of awareness of visual impairment, a lack of support in access needs at school, further and higher education and not knowing where to find the right resources to help them came out as the most important concerns.
- Our Young Voices and Student Voices groups organised focussed events aimed at blind and partially sighted people aged 18-25 and ran an additional targeted survey. Many of the themes identified were similar to the main Listening Month activity – and indeed many people in this age group took part in general sessions and the main survey too.

VI Lives

Produced jointly by Guide Dogs, RNIB and Thomas Pocklington Trust, [the VI Lives research study](#) provides insights into the experiences of people living with a vision impairment. It is based on hundreds of conversations with people who live with a vision impairment and provides one of the richest and most in-depth pictures yet of the varied experiences and challenges that affect their day-to-day lives.

The research study identifies a number of important areas where the charity and sight loss sectors and beyond need to think creatively to ensure the needs of blind and partially sighted people are being fully met. It found that:

- Improving public awareness, understanding and empathy is considered by blind and partially sighted people to be a priority for improving their quality of life. It was felt that public understanding of sight loss is poor, and that general ignorance has led to negative encounters.
- Diagnosis of sight loss is a critical moment for most, but there's not enough information, guidance and empathy. More practical and emotional support, better signposting and quicker referrals are needed.

- Better accessibility to transport and public places is the most important factor to improve quality of life. A quarter of people affected by sight loss feel they are not getting out as much as they would like.
- People affected by sight loss often feel cut off from employment opportunities and that little support is offered to them and nearly a third have difficulty stretching their household budget.
- 'Smart technology' such as smart speakers, smart watches and virtual assistants is a key enabler, helping blind and partially sighted people to access information and digital services. However there are disparities in awareness and access. Many are unaware of the available apps, specialist equipment and technology that can make their lives easier.



What next?

Thomas Pocklington Trust and Sight Loss Councils will be using the evidence collected through Listening Month to improve our services and inform policy influencing work and campaigning priorities.

Sight Loss Councils and the Public Affairs and Campaigns Team at Thomas Pocklington Trust will continue to work together to focus on the priority concerns identified by blind and partially sighted people and report back on progress made.

We will also be sharing the feedback collected as part of Listening Month with partner organisations as we recognise that engaging on these issues will be beyond the scope of any single organisation and in some cases beyond the strategy of Thomas Pocklington Trust.

We will be running Listening Month on a regular basis to monitor trends and expand the reach of our work. In follow up reports we will update on progress made against some of the issues highlighted and any action we have taken, either with or without others.

During 2023/24, Thomas Pocklington Trust and the Sight Loss Councils will be running campaigns on a number of issues covered in the Listening Month feedback. These will include:

- Public transport through our

#MakeTransportAccessible campaign

- Accessible streets and the built environment via our #StreetsForAll campaign
- Accessible health information via our #MakeHealthAccessible campaign

You can keep in touch with all the latest campaign news by visiting our websites:

www.sightlosscouncils.org.uk

www.pocklington-trust.org.uk

Regional and national breakdowns

East of England

In the East of England, where we had 43 participants, the main issues raised include inconsistent and inadequate adult social care services, a need for improved sensory services, mental health support, and accessibility of public transport.

They also suggest better collaboration between service providers and blind and partially sighted individuals, more employment opportunities, better accessibility in sport and leisure, and a more welcoming environment for job seekers.

They also suggest promoting VI awareness, providing VI training for staff, improving online accessibility, raising awareness about VI at a young age, and making a more inclusive and accessible environment for people with sensory impairments.

South East of England

Participants in the South East, where we had 35 responses, raised concerns across different aspects of life such as transportation, highways, vision impairment awareness, technology, rehabilitation, information, retail, employment, holidays, funding and medication.

Transportation: Issues include a lack of talking buses, Stagecoach buses

that are not speaking or stopping at stops, no driver awareness, and limited rural bus service. There are also problems with bus pass rules, scooters and bikes riding on pavements, and closing train ticket offices.

Highways: Concerns include pavement parking, restricted access to pavements due to A-boards, poor maintenance of pavements, poor lighting, and lack of consideration for pedestrians during construction work.

Vision Impairment Awareness: The need for education in schools and greater awareness among the general public about VI issues, including the use of long canes and mobility aids.

Technology: Better IT support is needed, as well as support with setting up and using technology in the home, and information about future technology.

Rehabilitation: There is a need for confidence-building, information about exercise groups, walking buddies, mobility training, and help at home for daily living.

VI Information: There are difficulties finding information about support and services for BPS people, and better communication with VI services is needed, especially across counties.

Regional and national breakdowns

Retail: Concerns include the frequent moving of items in stores, lack of accessibility, lack of awareness among staff, poor contrast on receipts, and difficulty accessing personal shopping services.

Employment: BPS people face uncertainty about what they can do, and lack of support for those who want to change jobs.

Holidays: Holidays are difficult to plan without sighted support, making it expensive.

Funding: Financial support or grants for buying expensive VI equipment is needed.

Medication: There are problems with blister packs and pharmacies not being aware of how to support BPS people with their medication needs.

London

Feedback in London, where we had seven participants, ranged across various aspects of life as a visually impaired person. Public awareness was a key concern, with comments about the need to bridge the gap in awareness and for VI people to feel confident about their impairment.

Many people discussed socializing and loneliness, including difficulties in making new friends, increased isolation, and the importance of

companionship. Several people mentioned retail, including the need for large print signs, accessible card readers, and more visible routes in stores.

People also discussed street accessibility, with a focus on more crossings and lighting, while others talked about employment, with a need for more job opportunities and apprenticeships. Access to arts and culture was also raised, as was health, including the need for better awareness in hospitals and more help for those with dual disabilities.

Issues with technology, including the need to keep up with accessible products and the inaccessibility of phone systems was also highlighted.

North West England

The themes that came up in North West discussions, where we had 176 participants, included difficulties with transport links and lack of audio announcements, cluttered pavements, difficulties accessing mobility services, lack of activities and support groups for working age people, difficulty in reading bills and accessing magnifiers, feelings of isolation, difficulties in getting around alone, lack of VI services, and the impact of the pandemic.

Regional and national breakdowns

North East England

In the North East, where we had 81 participants, concerns about transportation and support for visually impaired people and in particular, the lack of audio announcements on buses dominated discussion. Participants also discussed counselling, support, and signposting after initial diagnosis.

Yorkshire and Humberside

Various issues were discussed in this region, where we had 77 participants, including in relation to transport, culture, and online accessibility. The general accessibility of buses, including audio/visual displays and apps, is limited.

There have been reductions in bus services, and issues with ticket office closures in train stations. There is a lack of understanding of disability as a whole and a need for early education on the subject.

Online accessibility is limited with GP surgeries online being accessible through the NHS app, but other apps lacking accessibility. The focus for next year in Yorkshire includes improving accessible transport, streets, and regulating street cafes to comply with government guidelines. NHS accessibility needs to improve, with training for nurses and consistent

patient experiences.

Midlands

In the Midlands, our 158 participants highlighted concerns about the built environment, transport and health. Conditions for all pedestrians were problematic, particularly those who are blind or partially sighted.

Participants called for footpaths to be dedicated to pedestrians, audio descriptions on all regional buses, sounds on e-scooters for better safety, no cars parked on pavements, better information sharing between departments in hospitals and primary care, accessible format for letters for BPS parents/carers, and no guide dog refusals across the region.

South West of England

In the South West, our 98 participants highlighted a range of challenges including damaged pavements, bins, irregular bus services, incorrect information on bus apps, street clutter, silent electric cars and e-scooters, poor font/colors of fonts on websites, lack of large print communication from hospitals, long waiting lists for guide dogs, difficulty accessing thermostats, and inaccessible information.

On the other hand, some of the good practices include audio announcements on buses, large print

Regional and national breakdowns

materials from some companies, forums for connecting with people with visual impairments, improved accessibility in arts and museums, and accessible information at Southmead and Bristol hospitals. The feedback also highlights that there is a need for more awareness and action by the general public and organisations on these issues.

Devolved nations

Although Listening Month was focussed on England, we did receive 39 survey responses from Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

Methodology and profile of respondents

Methodology

Listening Month took place in November 2022 and through a national online survey, dozens of local and national engagement events and other formal and informal channels, we asked blind and partially sighted people to tell us what matter to them.

1,037 blind or partially sighted people shared their experiences and views with us. Approximately 70% of the responses were via the online survey and 30% through face-to-face or online engagement events.

Profile of respondents

Gender

- 45.4% Male
- 42.1% Female
- 12.5% Other/prefer not to say

Age

- 3.4% 16-24
- 11.2% 25-34
- 16.9% 35-44
- 22.5% 45-54
- 20.3% 55-64
- 25.8% 65+.

Ethnicity

- 88.9% White
- 6.2% Black, Black British, Caribbean or African
- 3.7% Asian or Asian British
- 1.2% Mixed or Multiple ethnic groups

About Thomas Pocklington Trust



Thomas Pocklington Trust (TPT)

Thomas Pocklington Trust is a national charity dedicated to enabling and empowering blind and partially sighted people of all ages to live the life they want to lead.

We are committed to increasing awareness and understanding of their needs and aspirations, to working with partners and to developing and implementing services which meet these needs to increase independence and improve lives.

Web: www.pocklington-trust.org.uk

Facebook: [@thomaspocklingtontrust](https://www.facebook.com/thomaspocklingtontrust)

Twitter: [@TPTgeneral](https://twitter.com/TPTgeneral)

LinkedIn: [@pocklington-trust](https://www.linkedin.com/company/pocklington-trust)