Keeping sight of Your Community

Our Manifesto for Welsh local authority elections 2022
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About RNIB Cymru
RNIB Cymru is the largest sight loss charity in Wales, providing support and services to blind and partially sighted people, their families, friends, and carers. We aim to improve lives and empower people to adapt to sight loss and keep their independence. We work in partnership with public, private and third sector bodies across Wales to deliver projects, training, services and give information, advice, and guidance.

We challenge inequalities by campaigning for social change and improvements to services. We believe that timely treatment should be available to all to prevent avoidable sight loss, and that the right support is there for people when prevention isn’t possible. We raise awareness of issues facing blind and partially sighted people on a daily basis.

Whether you have full, some, little or no sight, everybody should be able to lead independent and inclusive lives, without facing inequity and discrimination.

Focusing on Local
“I want all politicians at all levels to consider the impact of their decisions and make the world accessible and inclusive for vision impaired people.”
Nick, Brecon resident

It’s time to make a real change by doing things differently for people who see differently.
There are 111,000 people across Wales living with their own unique experience of sight loss. This number is projected to grow as our ageing population increases and age-related eye diseases, such as macular degeneration, cataracts, diabetic retinopathy, and glaucoma become more common.

But people with sight loss are people first. They are more than statistics and lists of conditions, and they just want to live in their homes and local communities. Our local area is where we choose to spend our time and decisions about it affect us in many ways.

Welsh local authorities play a pivotal role in empowering blind and partially sighted people in their area to live well. Blind and partially sighted people are more likely to rely on local council run services, such as public transport and social care. Those who have recently been diagnosed can be dependent on their councils for support, particularly from Rehabilitation Officers for Visual Impairments (ROVIs) who provide vital support to help people adapt to life with sight loss and keep their independence.

In order to deliver services that can meet the requirements of blind and partially sighted people, it’s vital that local authorities understand the needs and appreciate the challenges that people with sight loss face on a daily basis.
Local authorities must understand how their services are experienced by people with sight loss, and how the decisions they make affect them in the long term. Meaningful engagement must bring about beneficial social change. Information sent out by local authorities must be readily available in alternative formats. The streets we walk on and the public transport we ride on must be designed for everyone and fully accessible. Sport and leisure facilities must be inclusive to all people with sight loss. At RNIB Cymru we believe that there should be no diagnosis of sight loss without support. The referral pathways to support people must be clear and continuous so that people can not only move forward and adapt to their situation, but find a place where they can thrive.

Our manifesto sets out our calls to Welsh local authorities and shows how they can support their residents who are blind and partially sighted.

We are living through a time of great change and our priorities are changing too. The pandemic has been a time of great upheaval and uncertainty but if anything, it has shown us that society can adapt very quickly, and before automatically going ‘back to normal’ we should take this opportunity to re-evaluate what ‘normal’ should be for everybody.

“I am not asking for everything to be perfect; I just want things to be easier. Choice is not readily given to us over the decisions we make, such as where we go and how we’re going to get there. Living in a fully accessible area would make me feel confident, happy, relaxed, being able to enjoy what I’m doing, without the stress that I feel every day.”

Lee, Cardiff resident.
Our Manifesto Calls at a Glance

Whether you’re already a councillor or a prospective candidate, you can take steps to understand the needs of your blind and partially sighted residents and make positive changes in your community. If you’re successfully elected, you will have the power to make decisions that shape the lives of people with sight loss for the better.

RNIB Cymru is asking you to:
- Make a commitment to train all staff to understand sight loss and how it impacts a person’s life, with the appointment of a dedicated Sight Loss Champion.
- Ensure that everyone can access support from a specialist Rehabilitation Officer for the Visually Impaired (ROVI) when they have a change in vision.
- Make sure your communications and information are accessible.
- Establish or improve engagement with existing local disability access groups and ensure you undertake meaningful Equality Impact Assessments and Consultations.
- Prioritise pedestrians on your pavements by designing safe and accessible streets and walking routes, where people with sight loss won’t encounter obstacles.
- Review the accessibility of sports facilities and/or leisure centres that are overseen by local authorities and ensure staff are trained to understand sight loss.

Gain a Better Perspective of Sight Loss

The one thing that people with sight loss always ask for is understanding – understanding needs, understanding experiences, and understanding aspirations. Sight loss is a spectrum and there should be no ‘one size fits all’ approach when it comes to meeting the requirements of blind and partially sighted people. To design and deliver appropriate services, it’s important that Local Authorities understand sight loss and how it impacts their residents. Councils can often be the biggest employer in their area, ensuring staff are equipped with the right knowledge would mean that people with sight loss would be afforded so many more opportunities to feel included in society. Councils should lead the way in training staff to understand different aspects of sight loss from communication needs to offering sighted guiding.

“I feel like I am a second-class citizen in the way that councils make their decisions. I do not feel understood, and so ultimately, I feel excluded.”
Howell, Cardiff resident.
Train all Council staff members to understand sight loss.
Courses centred on vision loss are readily available and can be delivered to professionals and organisations, so we call on Local Authorities to commit time and resources to understanding sight loss. Ensure staff at customer contact points know how to communicate with a person with sight loss and know how to refer someone with a change in vision to sensory support services. Training for staff must be reviewed continually.

Appoint a Sight Loss Champion.
Many councils appoint Disability Champions as standard. RNIB Cymru wants councils to be more ambitious and appoint a Sight Loss Champion to take the lead on issues impacting local people with sight loss.

Secure the Right to Rehabilitation
Sight loss impacts every aspect of a person’s life, from their physical, emotional, and mental wellbeing to their ability to live independently, family, employment, and social life. ROVIs play an essential role in reducing the impact of sight loss, enabling blind and partially sighted people to adapt and to relearn the skills they need to live independently. Support can be practical and emotional and can include giving training in mobility aids and demonstrating adaptations around the house, to taking steps to increase social participation and confidence. Everyone who experiences a life-altering change in vision must be able to access help and support from their Sensory Support Services when they need it.

“My ROVI completely changed my life around and I wouldn’t be where I am today without their help. As I lost my sight, they made sure that I gained things such as new skills and a newfound independence, and the confidence to live the life I wanted to live.”
Rachel, Powys resident.
Ensure people can access a ROVI when needed.
Vision rehabilitation services are crucial to ensuring blind and partially sighted people can remain as independent as possible. However, these services are under significant pressures due to demands on health and social care, and waiting lists continue to grow. In some areas of Wales people are waiting for more than a year to see a ROVI. The pandemic has also necessitated telephone-based assessments, but these are not as effective as face-to-face support. Waiting times have been exacerbated by the pandemic, but ROVIs were already under-resourced with specialist workers spread thinly over large areas. Approved guidance is that each local authority should be employing a minimum of one ROVI per 70,000 population, but best practice is one ROVI per 50,000. RNIB Cymru calls for commitment to provide the best practice for ROVI and plan for a sustainable service. The reality is that across Wales, people are waiting too long for this life-changing help. Local authorities that offer Sensory Support Services must ensure that timely support is available.

Make Information and Communication Accessible
Local authorities need to regularly communicate with their residents about everything from changes to bin collections to planning notices and polling cards. But if some residents can’t see the information that the council has taken time and money to produce, then better solutions are needed to ensure that information and communications are effective and efficient.

“Letters in small print are useless to me. If the people sending them know that I can’t access them but don’t make any attempt to help me get the information, how am I supposed to know what they want me to do?”
Margaret, Newtown resident.

Provide written communication in alternative formats, such as audio, large print, and Braille.
Local authorities have a legal obligation to provide information and communication in bilingual alternative formats, staff in contact centres must know how to arrange these services and it must be clear to residents that they can ask for their preferred format. While it may be easier to offer a lot of information and communication online, ensure that services are not digital by default as this may exclude many blind and partially sighted people who are unable to access assistive technology.

Design websites, apps, and digital content with accessibility at the forefront.
When developing websites and apps for the public to use, accessibility must be considered from the start. Blind and partially sighted people should be able to do things, like adjusting font and to being able to use a screen reader. Digital documents or email attachments must be accessible files. It is important to make sure that visual content is inclusive and not a barrier to understanding information. RNIB can support you to make your communication and information more accessible to people with sight loss.
**Ensure Engagement is Meaningful**

When planning and delivering new services or changes to infrastructure, it is essential to involve people with sight loss to ensure that designs are inclusive and useable. Planners and designers need to understand how a blind or partially sighted person feels in a particular environment.

“Speaking with people with lived experience is the key. If you have full sight, how do you know what it's like to experience a space when you have little to none? How will you know what it feels like to run the tip of a cane over the ground? Or try to find information from signs with small font? Ask us, we'll tell you what it feels like. Then you can make things better.”

Huw, Machynlleth resident.

**Engage with existing local Disability Access Groups.**

Disability access groups are experts in their own experiences as disabled people. Engaging with them at the start of projects can save time and resources in the long term. If there isn’t a disability access group in your area it is vital that they are established. Those who have local knowledge and lived experience of sight loss will, invariably, also have potential solutions to those issues. If there isn’t an existing local Disability Access Group then work to establish one in your area.

**Ensure that everyone can contribute to Equality Impact Assessments and Consultations.**

Consult with disabled people on equality issues in a meaningful way and make sure that the process is conducted accessibly. If people with sight loss can’t contribute to Equality Impact Assessments, it is a barrier to getting meaningful feedback from them and they will be further excluded from any decisions made in their area. Review current processes and change them if necessary.
Prioritise Pavements for Pedestrians

Walking down the street is a fundamental way to get around our local area. Whether you’re popping to the shops, meeting for a meal, or taking a leisurely stroll, we all need to get out and about. However, this is by no means safe and easy for blind and partially sighted people. From bins and bollards blocking pathways, ‘A’ boards and parked cars on pavements, the silence of electric cars and e-bikes to the whizzing of cycles and e-scooters, it can feel like running a gauntlet. The Active Travel (Wales) Act 2013 requires local authorities to continuously improve facilities and routes for pedestrians and cyclists, especially by including their needs at design stages for road improvement schemes. The Covid-19 pandemic has exacerbated many of these challenges with hurried changes to the layout of our streets, meaning that people with sight loss face an increasing obstacle course when they leave home.

“I had a narrow miss with a cyclist whilst crossing the road, then again with a transit van whilst stepping down off a pavement, lucky for me a kind pedestrian helped me away from the danger, I might not be so lucky next time.”
Carol, Cardigan resident.
Design safe and accessible routes from doorstep to destination.
We call on councils to include blind and partially sighted people in design stages for proposed Active Travel routes. Councils can create inclusive street designs, with features such as fully accessible light-controlled crossings and ensure tactile paving is fitted in the appropriate places. so that people with sight loss can navigate and cross roads with greater safety and independence. We ask local authorities to pause the creation of ‘colourful’ or ‘rainbow’ crossings and find a suitable alternative because they can cause confusion for people with sight loss and other disabilities.

Pledge to end Shared Spaces
Avoid creating shared spaces where pedestrians and cyclists and other vehicles can mix freely on the same levelled area – where walking and cycling routes must be near each other, ensure a tactile delineation, such as a raised kerb, is between them. Design routes that will keep pedestrians and cyclists separate and safe. Make sure that cycle lanes are not placed in front of or between uncontrolled crossings or bus stops, and that blind and partially sighted people can understand when to safely cross cycle lanes. It is essential to have reliable, detectable kerbs and unobstructed pavements that are away from any vehicles.

Back the ban on E-Scooters
It is currently illegal to ride e-scooters on public land in Wales, and RNIB Cymru is calling for this to continue. These silent, high-speed vehicles are a danger to many blind and partially sighted people as they can’t always be seen and heard. E-scooters can also be left discarded on the pavement and cause trip hazards or block safe access to people with sight loss. We ask councils to back the ban on e-scooters and pledge not to trial their use of them in the coming years.

Keep pavements clear of unnecessary clutter and enforce the Welsh Government’s Pavement Parking Ban.
Encountering something unexpected on their journey can be a danger to blind or partially sighted people. If a person with sight loss is forced to step into the road because of clutter or parked cars, then they may not be able to see oncoming traffic or hear a silent electric vehicle. Prioritise the safety of blind and partially sighted people and do not allow businesses to take over small or narrow pavements with 'A' boards, chairs and tables. Think carefully about the placement of street furniture and regularly review the accessibility of your streets. We call on councils to review e-vehicle charging facilities so that trailing charging cables on pavements don't become normalised. Support the Welsh Government's aim to ban pavement parking wherever possible and take steps to tackle the problem.
**Provide Sport and Leisure Opportunities**

Being able to participate in sport and leisure activities is key to improving physical and mental wellbeing. Blind and partially sighted people should not be excluded because of inaccessible equipment or inadequate staff training. It is vital that local authorities review the sporting and leisure provisions in their area to ensure that people with sight loss can participate.

“Sport, and being active, is the glue that holds my mental health together.”

David, Barmouth resident.

Review the accessibility of any local authority-run sporting or leisure facilities and ensure that staff are trained to understand sight loss.

It is crucial that people with sight loss can access sporting or leisure facilities to keep physically and mentally well. But blind and partially sighted people regularly encounter difficulties using gyms, swimming pools and sporting facilities. Review equipment and facilities to ensure that people with sight loss are not facing unnecessary barriers. In order to appropriately assist customers, leisure centre staff should be trained to understand sight loss. By ensuring that staff can offer reasonable adjustments and sighted guiding, blind and partially sighted customers will not only be able to use the facilities with more independence, but they will also feel welcomed and wanted.

**How You Can Supporting Blind and Partially Sighted People in Your Area**

- Pledge to become an RNIB Sight Loss Champion. RNIB will then support you with briefings and tailored statistics about sight loss in your area.
- Commit to undertaking Sight Loss Awareness training and learn the correct skills to be a sighted guide.
- Meet with local blind and partially sighted residents for a blindfold walk using ‘simulation specs’ which simulate different eye conditions, and experience first-hand the challenges of street obstacles and shared space developments.
- Create an audio version of your manifesto that people with sight loss can listen to and produce campaign materials in a range of accessible formats.
- Make your social media more accessible by including image descriptions, by using the alt text function and by using camel case in your hashtags.