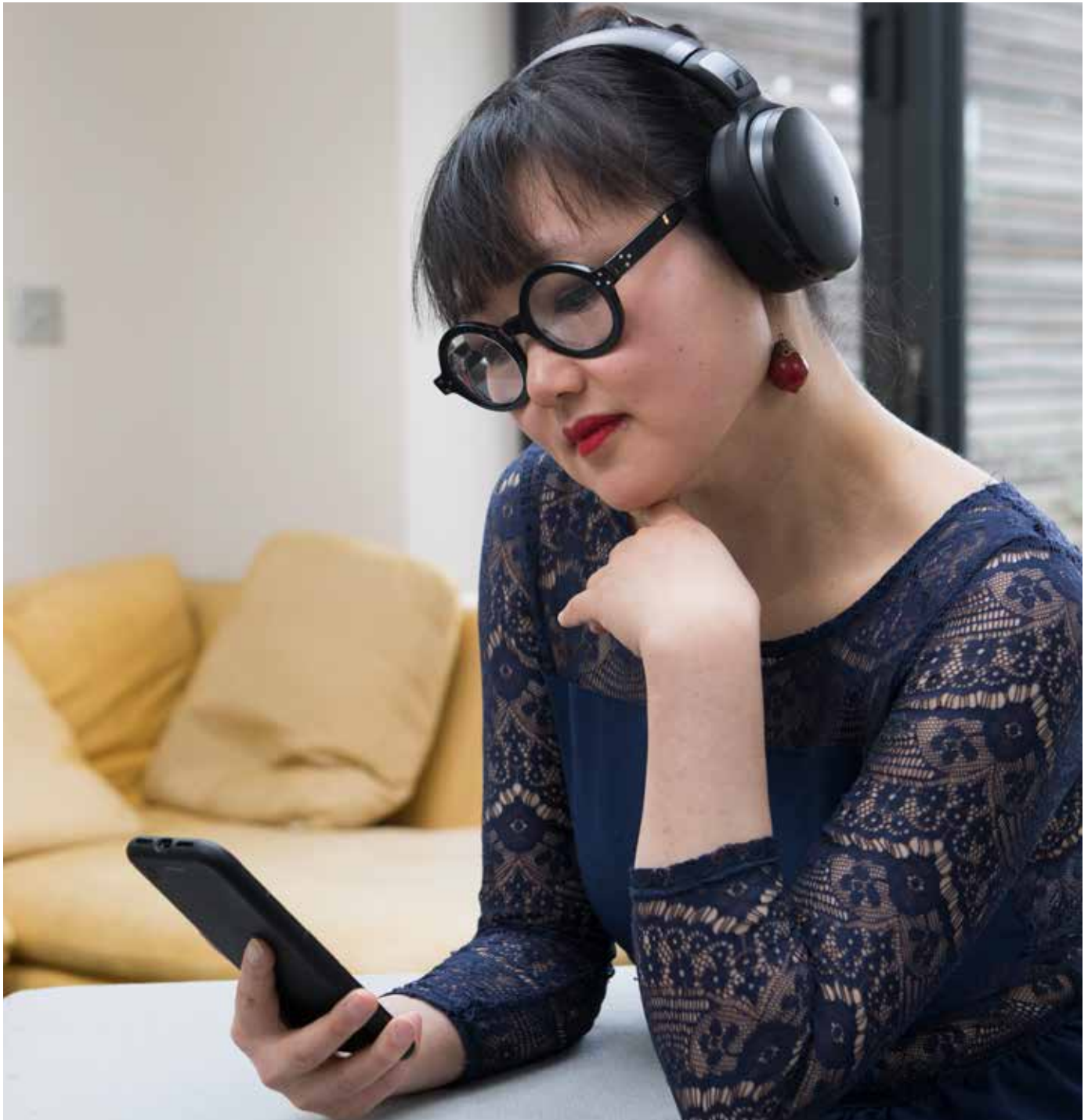


# Sight Loss and Local Digital Strategy Engagement

How blind and partially sighted people can bridge the digital divide





This document has been developed as part of the VI Sector Partnership - a collaborative group of organisations supporting people with visual impairments. The group includes RNIB, Guide Dogs, Visionary, Macular society, Blind Veterans, Glaucoma UK, Retina UK, TAVIP, and Thomas Pocklington Trust.

**Developed in partnership**

**R N I B**

See differently



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# Introduction

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## Purpose

Digital inclusion isn't only about whether people can **access** the internet: it's also about their **ability** to use it. We know that people with sight loss are twice as likely to be digitally excluded when compared to the general population.

There are currently more than two million people living in the UK with sight loss. Only 365,000 of these two million are registered as partially sighted or severely sight impaired (SSI) with their local authority.

A large proportion of individuals with sight loss are over the age of 65. Lloyds Bank estimates that in 2020, 16 per cent of UK adults, or nine million people, do not have the digital foundation skills to use the internet and their devices by themselves. (Reference APDF Sight Loss and Technology Briefing).

The coronavirus pandemic has vastly sped up the number of services which are delivered digitally. Although a blessing for many, this has further isolated many individuals; particularly people with sight loss who are less likely to have skills and knowledge to get and stay online.

Local and Mayoral Combined Authorities can work to bridge this digital gap and better provide those living with sight loss with the support they need to fully engage in the digital era. Many, if not all, Local and Mayoral Combined Authorities across the UK

have local digital engagement plans or strategies; this is underpinned by broader government digital strategy, to create a 'world-leading digital economy that works for everyone' and which holds the ambition of ensuring that 'everyone has the skills they need to flourish, with nobody left behind'.

However, as research has shown (Sight Loss and Technology Briefing, RNIB), if current trends continue over the next six years, nearly all people across the UK will be online, yet it will take an additional eight years before nearly all people with sight loss are online.

We must have the services and support which meet the digital needs of those living with sight loss, both registered and unregistered.

Sight loss organisations, which work at a grassroots level to provide support to the local community, are in a unique and privileged position to advocate on behalf of their needs and requirements.

Greater collaboration between sight loss organisations and Local or Mayoral Combined Authorities will not only allow sight loss organisations to amplify the voices of unsupported individuals regarding technology and digital services, but also provide them a greater range of tools to empower those with sight loss to be independent and lead fuller lives.

## Audience

Readership of this document is aimed at, but not limited to the following individuals or groups:

- Local sight loss organisations, particularly, but not limited to Chief Executive Officers, Digital/Technology coordinators, and campaigners.

## Objectives of this briefing

**The objectives of this document are to:**

- Create and strengthen partnerships between sight loss organisations and Local or Mayoral Combined Authorities
- Foster greater engagement between sight loss organisations and Local or Mayoral Combined Authorities
- Support sight loss organisations to raise awareness of their local community's digital support requirements.

## Benefits

Together we want to enhance the quality of life and independence of blind and partially sighted individuals across the UK. This will be achieved by:

- Ensuring sight loss and accessibility is built into local digital engagement strategies
- Allowing sight loss organisations to access available funding opportunities
- Empowering blind and partially sighted people to become digitally included
- Enabling blind and partially sighted individuals to access public services, including
  - Health and social care
  - Online banking services
  - Housing
- Providing blind and partially sighted individuals with access to recreational and lifestyle services, which will have a positive impact on their physical and mental wellbeing
- Improving access to information and learning opportunities
- Providing better employment opportunities
- Providing better access to e-learning and education
- Choice of shopping – offering variety and benefiting from online discounts
- More financial savings and time.

This will help to bridge the digital divide and empower blind and partially sighted people to lead fuller, independent lives, as well as more actively contribute to and be integrated into society.

# Developing effective partnerships

Each Local and Mayoral Combined Authority will have produced its own digital strategy, which details how it plans to support their residents to be digitally included. This strategy is driven by and put into action by a 'Board' or 'Taskforce', which may include representation from a range of related industries, such as broadband providers, technology enterprises, as well as representatives from community organisations. The structure and content of each digital strategy, and the coordinating board, will differ from authority to authority.

To foster greater collaboration between sight loss organisations and Local and Mayoral Combined Authorities, the VI sector partnership suggests a process made up of three main areas – these are:

1. Engage
2. Be active
3. Have impact

## Engagement

To better advocate the needs of blind and partially sighted individuals within the digital space, sight loss organisations may investigate their local authority's digital strategy. This could also provide information on how sight loss organisations can partner with their local authority to implement the strategy.

**You may need to register interest to partner with the local authority or be nominated to join the board.**

When engaging with local authorities, sight loss charities should highlight the barriers that lead to digital inclusion.

The key barriers faced by blind and partially sighted people to digital inclusion are:

1. Cost of technology
2. Accessibility issues
3. Knowledge, skills, and confidence
4. Personal safety considerations

While the onus is not on sight loss organisations to resolve these issues alone, it's important to initiate a dialogue with the local authority and partner together to address the barriers.

Engagement is a two-way conversation, so it's a good idea to find out more about the local plans, who is responsible for delivering the plan, and the local authority's ability and inclusivity.

## Be active

Once engaged with the digital strategy in the local area, sight loss organisations would benefit from gathering a greater understanding of the strategy board, how it is structured, and how they are positioned to better support the local blind and partially sighted community.

**Other areas to explore could include:**

- What is the board's vision and objectives?

- How the board operates, e.g. frequency of meetings, day-to-day activities etc
- Which organisations are represented on the board and their areas of expertise
- Current projects/initiatives in progress
- How these projects meet the needs of people with sight loss
- Recently completed projects, including outcomes and learnings
- Available funding opportunities within the special needs sector
- Networking opportunities.

This research would enable sight loss organisations to conduct a gap analysis to show where blind and partially sighted individuals are involved and supported, not currently supported, as well as new opportunities for engagement.

For example, according to Norwich City Council digital strategy, it reports:

“We recognise that we live in an increasingly digital world where many people are already benefiting from the internet, digital TV and mobile communications.

All the above offer opportunities to learn, save money and keep in touch with friends and relatives. When individuals are digitally active it can improve the accessibility of services and support to people who find themselves physically and emotionally isolated.

However, there is growing evidence that shows there are a significant number of people who do not or cannot make use of these opportunities.

By making sure that opportunities exist to enhance peoples’ skills and confidence in the use of technology we will be making great strides in keeping people in touch with their community and society in general.

In collaboration with our partners, we are developing an action plan that will help us to move forward with digital inclusion in Norwich.”

**Reference:** Norwich City Council Digital Strategy

Board meetings are a sight loss organisation’s opportunity to bring their concerns to the table, to educate and advocate for the needs of blind and partially sighted residents specific to the local area.

Some of the testimonials from local organisations of their individual experiences:

**“Being a member of the [Greater Manchester] Digital Task Force has introduced Henshaw’s to like-minded organisations not usually in our ‘field’ of work, and it has provided real collaboration, funding, referrals, and general awareness opportunities in a very short space of time. It has also allowed us to share information and influence others regarding accessibility and assistive technology.”**

**Mark Belcher – Community Services Manager, Henshaws**

## The meetings can be a forum for sight loss organisations to:

1. Bring in specialist knowledge of the fundamental needs of blind and partially sighted people in accessing digital services
2. Present personas of these technology users, to enable the strategy board to engage and identify with their specialist needs
3. Advocate their accessibility needs with respect to digital services e.g. by referencing Lloyds' seven basic tasks [[rnib.in/LloydsBank](https://rnib.in/LloydsBank)]
4. Detail the usability of digital devices, including available adaptations and upskilling opportunities
5. Provide estimated costs of special adaptations and equipment
6. Describe the barriers and challenges around the digital divide, and
7. Raise awareness of specific needs around digital poverty
8. Discuss how current and future projects could better support the needs of blind and partially sighted individuals.





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## Have impact

This exchange of specialist knowledge would enable sight loss organisations and local authorities to work more closely together, to ensure current and future projects support and include blind and partially sighted people.

Some examples of a plan to include people with disabilities may include.

a. Brent council digital strategy 2022-26

- Set out the accessibility standards that new technology needs to comply with and help services plan their digital provision so that it is accessible for all residents.
- Digital accessibility fundamental training for all frontline staff.

b. North Tyneside Council Digital Strategy 2020-24

- Continued investment in ICT infrastructure to ensure Council data remains safe and accessible.
- Work to ensure residents, businesses and visitors are safe, digitally confident and connected both in terms of physical access to technology and digital connection.
- Assistive technologies solutions explored.

c. Lambeth Council Digital Strategy March 2021

- Review potential assistive tech solutions across all service user groups to provide the best outcomes for clients in a modern and independent manner.

- Pilot assistive technology in accommodation to enable more people to manage and maintain their independence with 24-hour virtual support when required.
  - All council websites and services will comply with accessibility legislation or describe the actions and timescales needed.
- d. Redbridge Council Digital and Customer experience Strategy
- We take accessibility very seriously and will make sure that we deliver to accessibility standards and continue to work with our partners, like One Place East, RNIB and Age UK to provide access to services to all.
  - Inclusion isn't just about accessibility; it's about making our services equal to everyone that lives in Redbridge.
  - Our Vision is creating a digitally resilient borough focused on providing excellent customer experiences.

## The way forward / Next Steps

Together as a sector, our aim is to enhance the quality of life and independence of blind and partially sighted individuals across the UK. This will be achieved by fostering greater collaboration between national and regional sight loss organisations, and through partnering with Local and Mayoral Combined Authorities, by Engaging, be actively involved, and having impact.

Greater collaboration between sight loss organisations and Local or Mayoral Combined Authorities will not only allow sight loss organisations to amplify the voices of unsupported individuals regarding technology and digital services, but also provide them a greater range of tools to empower those with sight loss to be independent and lead fuller lives.

When engaging with Local Authorities, sight loss charities should highlight the barriers that lead to digital inclusion. While the onus is not on sight loss organisations to resolve these issues alone, it's important to initiate a dialogue and partner together to address the barriers.

Digital engagement strategies exist to ensure people across the country have access to and are supported to engage with digital services. The impact of working together can be far greater than as individual organisations, and through partnering on matters relating to digital inclusion, the lives of blind and partially sighted individuals can be drastically improved in the years to come.

# Appendices

## Appendix 1 – Examples of some local authority digital strategies

### **Brent Council:**

Brent Borough Plan 2015-2019 | Brent Council (<https://www.brent.gov.uk/the-council-and-democracy/strategies-priorities-and-policies/brent-digital-strategy>)

### **Wigan Council:**

Digital strategy ([wigan.gov.uk](http://wigan.gov.uk))

### **Greater Manchester:**

digital-strategy-2018-2020.pdf ([greatermanchester-ca.gov.uk](http://greatermanchester-ca.gov.uk))

### **Rushmoor Council:**

Customer and Digital Strategy – Rushmoor Borough Council ([www.rushmoor.gov.uk/digitalstrategy](http://www.rushmoor.gov.uk/digitalstrategy))

### **Norwich City Council:**

Digital inclusion strategy | Digital inclusion strategy | Norwich City Council ([https://www.norwich.gov.uk/info/20195/policies\\_plans\\_and\\_strategies/3763/digital\\_inclusion\\_strategy](https://www.norwich.gov.uk/info/20195/policies_plans_and_strategies/3763/digital_inclusion_strategy))

### **North Tyneside Council:**

North Tyneside Council Digital-Strategy 2020 – 2024 (<https://my.northtyneside.gov.uk/category/616/digital-strategy>)

## Appendix 2 – References

- a. APDF report on sight loss and technology briefing: <https://www.rnib.org.uk/sites/default/files/APDF%20Sight%20Loss%20and%20Technology%20Briefing.pdf>
- b. Lloyds Bank (2020) Lloyds Bank UK Consumer Digital Index 2020 <https://bit.ly/2UPEPHb>

# Contact sheet – Sight Loss and Local Digital Strategy Engagement

A table with two columns and ten rows. The first row is a header row

<b>Organisation</b>	<b>Contact</b>
<b>Blind Veterans UK</b>	<a href="http://www.blindveterans.org.uk/">www.blindveterans.org.uk/</a> <a href="https://twitter.com/BlindVeterans">twitter.com/BlindVeterans</a>
<b>Glaucoma UK</b>	<a href="http://www.glaucoma.uk">www.glaucoma.uk</a> <a href="https://twitter.com/glaucoma_uk">twitter.com/glaucoma_uk</a>
<b>Guide Dogs</b>	<a href="http://www.guidedogs.org.uk">www.guidedogs.org.uk</a> <a href="https://twitter.com/guidedogs">twitter.com/guidedogs</a>
<b>Macular Society</b>	<a href="http://www.macularsociety.org">www.macularsociety.org</a> <a href="https://twitter.com/MacularSociety">twitter.com/MacularSociety</a>
<b>Retina UK</b>	<a href="http://www.retinauk.org.uk/">www.retinauk.org.uk/</a> <a href="https://twitter.com/RetinaUK">twitter.com/RetinaUK</a>
<b>RNIB</b>	<a href="http://www.rnib.org.uk/">www.rnib.org.uk/</a> <a href="https://twitter.com/rnib">twitter.com/rnib</a>
<b>Thomas Pocklington Trust</b>	<a href="http://www.pocklington-trust.org.uk/">www.pocklington-trust.org.uk/</a> <a href="https://twitter.com/TPTgeneral">twitter.com/TPTgeneral</a>
<b>TAVIP</b>	<a href="http://www.tavip.org.uk/">www.tavip.org.uk/</a>
<b>Visionary</b>	<a href="http://www.visionary.org.uk/">www.visionary.org.uk/</a> <a href="https://twitter.com/visionary_uk">twitter.com/visionary_uk</a>