



Bradbury House, Park Building, Pontypool NP4 6JH

Dear Councillor

July 2020

Briefing on Covid-19 and people with sight loss

As Wales gradually moves out of this period of lockdown and move into a new phase of living with Covid-19, Sight Cymru would like to urge policy and decision makers to keep the needs of those with sight loss, and indeed, people with all impairments, at the forefront of any policy change or decision made. **We ask that any policy or decision is taken in partnership with people with visual impairments.** One in 5 people in Wales over the age of 75 has some degree of sight loss. Ensuring that fully accessible policies and practices are put in place will ensure the safety of some of the most vulnerable people in our society, as well as the nation as a whole.

Accessing Information

The Covid-19 pandemic has highlighted the need for clear, timely and accessible information. As Wales eases measures, it is critical that any change in policy is delivered in an accessible way to ensure those at higher risk and indeed the wider communities are kept safe.

For safeguarding reasons, and indeed in line with Welsh Government guidance maintaining that the safeguarding of vulnerable adults remains paramount, we recommend that all direct communication to individuals is delivered in the most suitable and appropriate way to the individual. Having a friend or carer reading out a personal letter relating to an individual's health issues is a breach of data protection, and indeed human rights. With information conveyed on websites, social media or any other digital platforms, it is vital that all text can be accessed with a screen reader, any visual images are described and any videos are fully audible. With increased signage inside shops and other public buildings

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informing people of the correct way to travel, people with sight loss are at an increased risk due to the inaccessibility of the written signs. We ask that shops and other service providers take into account the needs of people with sight loss when designing these signs, considering alternative audio formats if possible.

Social distancing

Many people with loss to their peripheral vision may find it difficult to maintain the correct social distance. A physical object such as a supermarket trolley may aid individuals in maintaining distance. This may prove less of a challenge in supermarkets and more difficult in smaller shops, restaurants and other smaller public spaces. Colour contrast and tactile markings would help to ensure social distance and any correct direction of travel required is maintained. Many people with sight loss require a guide when shopping or accessing services. Many people with visual impairments often need to pick up items and bring them closer to their face (using a magnifier if needed) before deciding whether to purchase them. We would like to urge policy and decision makers to take into account a consideration of these needs when moving onto the next phase of this pandemic.

Physical access

Many supermarkets and other service providers have installed Perspex screens for the safety of their staff and customers. While the safety of our community is priority, Perspex screens can often distort facial movements, making it very difficult for many with visual impairments, who take their cue from facial expressions, to communicate. Sight Cymru recommends that the rims of any Perspex screens are marked with a contrasting colour to aid vision. Facemasks also obstruct a large

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proportion of facial expression and movement, a key communication aid for many with sensory impairments. While these measures are important, we ask that staff and personnel are considerate to the needs of people with sight loss.

As society resumes to a degree of normality, hand washing will continue to be of paramount importance to ensure the safety of the individual and the wider community. We would ask service providers to consider the needs of people with visual impairments when considering hand washing facilities, making such considerations as contrasting colours of the soap, sink and towel.

The change to our physical environment

We fully support the decision to increase opportunities for cycling and walking. Exercise is crucial to maintaining good eye health, general health and mental wellbeing. However, to ensure people with sight loss can safely access these routes, accessibility issues need to be at the forefront of every decision made relating to this policy:

- We urge that, from the very outset, design work for any change in street design is taken in collaboration with individuals with sight loss
- When widening pavements, there should be a definite distinction between the kerb and the road. Painting the kerb in a contrasting colour and tactile surfaces, will enable individuals with vision impairments to detect the increased space and keep safe
- Cycle lanes to be kept separate from allocated walkways
- Signage for cycle lanes to be placed on the cycle lane or road, not on the areas dedicated to pedestrians

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- With any cafes or restaurants opening their services out onto the pavement, we ask that an Equality Impact Review is carried out to ensure such measures do not hinder the accessibility of people with sight loss and other impairments

Raising public awareness

Maintaining social distancing is often challenging for many people with sight loss. With no peripheral vision, it is often difficult to gauge the correct social distance required. Unfortunately, Sight Cymru is being made increasingly aware of some individuals with sight loss being the target of verbal abuse, when perhaps maintaining the correct social distance is proving challenging. Sight loss is a hidden impairment and we would encourage all organisations and sectors of society to help raise awareness of the issues that many people with sight loss and other hidden impairments face in regards to maintaining the correct distance.

Loneliness and isolation amongst people with sight loss

The importance of touch and human contact is crucial to people with sight loss. Individuals with visual impairments often rely heavily or even solely on physical guiding and feeling the physical world around them. With a large part of these ways of communicating potentially being removed, there is likely to be an increased feeling of loneliness and isolation amongst people with sight loss, potentially leading to a decrease in wellbeing and mental health. Sight Cymru is proactively addressing this with our wellbeing ringaround project to vulnerable people on our database, and we see the need for this kind of work increasing in the short to medium term.

If you would like any further information, please don't hesitate to contact me at esther.weller@sightcymru.org.uk,

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Best Wishes

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