

RNIB Manifesto: General election 2005

3,000 votes
could deliver
you this seat

Will you
deliver for
3,000 of your
constituents?



RNIB

Helping you live with sight loss

Three thousand votes could deliver you this seat. Will you deliver change for three thousand people in your constituency with sight problems? We want you to take action in the coming Parliament on the challenges outlined in this manifesto, and look forward to working with you.



RNIB Manifesto: General Election 2005



What 3,000 of your future constituents want you to do in the next Parliament

There are two million people in the UK with sight problems. That means an average of 3,000 in every Parliamentary constituency. Despite recent disability legislation blind and partially sighted people still face **discrimination, social exclusion** and **poverty**.

- 73 per cent of older blind and partially sighted people live in poverty with a household income of less than £195 a week.
- 75 per cent of working age people with sight problems are unemployed.
- 60 per cent never go out alone because of hazards in the pedestrian environment and the inaccessibility of public transport.

RNIB is now a membership organisation and over the last two years we have been joined by over 10,000 members. In December/January we gave our members the chance to say what the most important priorities are for them in the next Parliament. They have come up with three answers:

1. **Improved benefits** to tackle poverty, social exclusion and the extra costs of transport and communication.
2. Greater **access to information** in formats like large print, audio tape and braille.
3. Improved **civil rights** to protect from discrimination in areas like employment, accessing goods and services, transport and voting.

We want your support for change, to tackle the poverty, discrimination and exclusion that people with sight problems face in many areas.

1. Benefits: the need for change

Nearly 80 per cent of blind and partially sighted people are over 65. They are often isolated and nearly 75 per cent live in poverty, many unaware of the benefits to which they are entitled. People aged 65 and over who lose their sight cannot access Disability Living Allowance (DLA) and therefore are excluded from help that this benefit gives with extra mobility costs. It is a double blow to have to face the disabling effects of sight loss and to not have any help with extra mobility costs that blind and partially sighted people face.

This is the **number one priority** our members want to address in the coming Parliament – hardship and social exclusion brought about by discrimination in the benefits system: first on the grounds of age and second on the grounds of impairment where Blind people under 65 cannot access the higher rate mobility component of DLA because sight loss is not regarded in the rules as having as much of an impact on mobility as physical disabilities. This is untrue and discriminatory.

2. Access to information

We now live in a society that relies on instant information, on the web, via email, through digital television and radio. Yet people with sight problems face massive exclusion from these media and also from printed publications. Each year 95 per cent of books, magazines and newspapers will never become available in a format that blind and partially sighted people can read. In addition, inaccessible websites, correspondence sent in small print and problems with digital technology create huge barriers in accessing information. This is our members' **second priority**.

3. Improved civil rights

Civil rights for disabled people have been greatly extended since the passage of the Disability Discrimination Act in 1995 and subsequent legislation. However, our members still feel that civil rights need extending in many areas, particularly employment, access to goods and services, transport and voting. This is our members' **third priority**.

Working together

The goals in this manifesto are supported by the UK's leading charities working on sight loss – RNIB, Guide Dogs for the Blind Association, Action for Blind People and NALSVI (National Association of Local Societies for Visually Impaired People).

What has been achieved in this Parliament, since 2001, for people with sight problems?

In our Manifesto for the 2001 General Election we called for dramatic improvements in the consistency and quality of education, employment and community care services for blind and partially sighted people. We wanted people with sight problems to enjoy free public transport across the UK and improved safety and quality in the street environment. We called for equal access to the communications revolution, enforceable civil rights and the eradication of poverty amongst disabled people. Finally, we called for an eye care system that does not let people lose their sight unnecessarily or leave those newly diagnosed with sight loss to cope on their own. How much has been achieved?

- **The Communications Act, 2003** has set the framework for inclusive digital TV, placing obligations on broadcasters and manufacturers to meet the access needs of blind and partially sighted people.
- **The Copyright (Visually Impaired Persons) Act 2002** has removed the need to seek copyright permission to make accessible format copies of print books, reducing the time it takes to create braille, tape and large print.
- **The Private Hire Vehicles (Carriage of Guide Dogs etc) Act 2002** has placed obligations on taxi drivers so that they cannot discriminate against assistance dog users when ordering or using taxi services.



- The creation of **National Eye Care Pathways** is speeding up the journey from diagnosis to referral and treatment.
- The nationwide implementation of **Photodynamic Therapy** treatment means that thousands of people are getting treatment for Age-related Macular Degeneration who would otherwise experience sight loss.
- **The Special Educational Needs and Disability Act, 2001 (SENDA)**, has given disabled pupils rights.
- New duties under the **Disability Discrimination Act, 1995 (DDA)** have afforded protection to an additional 600,000 disabled employees of small firms, and service

providers now have to make reasonable adjustments to the physical features of their premises.

- And disabled people's civil rights will be further extended when measures in the **Disability Discrimination Bill** come into force.

These achievements are of real importance to blind and partially sighted people and there is much to be celebrated in the last four years. However, there are still huge challenges to be met. People with sight problems still face barriers in many areas of life, some unchanged from four years ago. We want your support for change over the coming Parliament to build on the successes of the last four years.



Our agenda for change: What people with sight problems want in the next parliament

1. Benefits, social exclusion and poverty

This area is the number one priority that our members want to see action on.

What are the problems we currently face?

Meeting the extra costs of disability: Blind and partially sighted people face poverty through benefits that do not take into account the extra costs of sight loss in terms of mobility and communication expenses. The higher rate mobility component of Disability Living Allowance is not available to blind people and the benefits system therefore fails to recognise the extra costs of blindness.

Recent research by the Centre for Research in Social Policy at Loughborough University estimated the unmet costs per week that blind and partially sighted people are facing, excluding personal assistance costs, to be £200.

Age discrimination: There is also discrimination in the benefits system against older people who cannot claim Disability Living Allowance if newly disabled from the age of 65. This means that older people get no help with extra mobility costs and are also not eligible

for the Motability scheme. Being 65 or over and disabled does not mean that an individual wants to be house bound, yet benefits policy works on this assumption.

“ Benefits, especially the lower rate mobility component of Disability Living Allowance, nowhere near cover the cost of having to use taxis to places not reached by our local bus services. We have no train station, so to reach one the fare is about £9 return. Both my husband and I are registered blind, our family live miles away, so we have no possibility of access to a car. If we want to go to the cinema it is a similar story as we need to go into Burnley itself, and then the cinema lies on a busy dual carriage way and the roads are impossible to cross. We live three quarters of a mile from a bus stop to get anywhere. Our taxis do not even start until after 9.00am, so if we want to be somewhere before that time, we have to order one from a 24 hour firm in Burnley centre with a consequent rise in the fare charged.”

Barbara Porter, Lancashire

Fuel poverty: Younger disabled people face fuel poverty through exclusion from being able to claim the £200 Winter Fuel Allowance. Many older blind and partially sighted people, despite the allowance, are living in poverty, unable to pay for essentials because benefits do not reflect their extra fuel and other living costs.

Pensions: Blind and partially sighted pensioners have an inadequate standard of living in retirement. This is because with 75 per cent of blind and partially sighted people of working age not in work, few get a chance to build up a decent occupational pension pot and therefore rely solely on the state pension for their income.

Benefits take-up: Take-up of these vital benefits remains low at around 50 per cent, unchanged over the last five years.

What are we calling for?

Discrimination in the benefits system must be tackled to ensure that the extra costs of sight loss are taken into account.

- Blind and partially sighted people should be eligible to claim the higher rate mobility component of DLA.
- People registered as blind or partially sighted should be passported to receive DLA without having to go through a further claims process.
- There should be no maximum age to begin claiming DLA.

- Government must tackle the poverty that blind, partially sighted, and other disabled people face in retirement due to high unemployment levels restricting opportunities to save for retirement.
- A take-up campaign for disability benefits should be launched.

2. Access to information

What are the problems we currently face?

Books, magazines and newspapers: Each year only five per cent of books, magazines and newspapers will become available in formats accessible to people with sight problems.

Doctor's letters: Essential information, such as medical appointment letters or labelling on medication is not always available in accessible formats.



What are we calling for?

- The number of books produced in accessible formats (large print, audio tape and braille) each year must be increased to an overall level of at least 10 per cent.
- VAT must be reduced on unabridged audio books.
- The government must establish an "Access to Reading Fund" to increase the money available for creating accessible formats.
- Government must work with publishers and the voluntary sector to find ways of speeding up the production of accessible formats.
- Service providers must recognise their duties under the DDA and provide correspondence in accessible formats.

“ I think that although getting access to information has improved, there is still a long way to go and plenty of room for improvement. My utility bills and bank statements are accessible to me in braille, but letters from my GP, dentist or local hospitals are in print and so are letters from the Benefits Agency. These provide services which we all use every day and therefore we should be able to read their correspondence, particularly when it comes to our health. We may miss a hospital appointment because of not being able to read the letter. Our correspondence is private and confidential but it does not remain so if other people have to read it to us. ”

Paula Pinder, East Yorkshire



3. Civil Rights

What are the problems we currently face?

Legal enforcement of the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA): Blind, partially sighted and other disabled people are facing barriers in taking service providers who discriminate against them to the County or Sheriff Court under the DDA due to the cost and risks involved.

Voting: Voting systems have been inaccessible and stopped people with sight problems casting a secret and independent ballot.

Transport and environment: Older inaccessible rail vehicles will not be taken out of service for many years to come, making the transport network inaccessible for disabled people. The street environment can be cluttered and hazardous.

Commission for Equality and Human Rights: Disabled people have concerns around the creation of a new Commission for Equality and Human Rights incorporating the Disability Rights Commission.

What are we calling for?

- **Legal enforcement of the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA):** Cases taken under the DDA relating to discrimination in accessing goods and services should be heard in Equality Tribunals.

- **Voting:** Future voting systems and pilot voting programmes must be designed to be fully accessible for blind and partially sighted people. This will be vital for the inclusivity of future elections and referenda that will take place.

- **Transport and environment:** Transport services must be made accessible for all disabled people, including aviation and shipping.

The street environment must be kept free of clutter and hazards, with pavement parking and cycling clamped down on.

- **Committee for Equality and Human Rights:** The Committee for Equality and Human Rights, once established, must be adequately resourced and staffed to ensure disability discrimination is tackled with the same effectiveness as shown by the Disability Rights Commission.

// Railway stations often have poorly located loudspeakers, which are competing with background noises which leaves the information they are trying to communicate unintelligible. //

John Miller, Macclesfield

4. Help and support

What are the problems we currently face?

Assessment: The length of time taken to assess the needs of newly blind and partially sighted people varies massively around the country, with some social services departments taking up to a year to visit people after they have been diagnosed with a sight problem.

Independent living: Community equipment provision does not reflect the needs of people with sight problems. Items such as white canes, CCTVs, liquid

level indicators and bump-on stickers for appliances can maintain independence in the home, prevent accidents, and help with mobility.

What are we calling for?

- All blind and partially sighted people should have access to prompt rehabilitation, social care and community equipment services.
- Community equipment provision must include key items for people with sight loss, such as white canes and CCTV equipment.





5. Eye health

What are the problems we currently face?

Vital sight saving treatments are still not available in all areas. Low vision services for those who have experienced sight loss are varied in quality. Problems exist with access to treatment for chronic eye conditions.

What are we calling for?

- Comprehensive and high quality low vision and rehabilitation services must be ensured nationally.
- Full and rapid rollout of the new patient pathways set out in the National Eye Care Plan.
- Sight saving treatments must be made available to all who can benefit from them.

6. Access to technology

What are the problems we currently face?

New technology: for example Chip and PIN has not been designed to be fully accessible for blind and partially sighted people, leading to anxiety and potential social and financial exclusion.

What are we calling for?

- Blind and partially sighted people's needs must be fully taken into account in the establishment and operation of a national ID card scheme.
- New technology, such as Chip and PIN must be inclusive, with alternative access methods available for people with sight problems.

7. Employment and Access to Work

What are the problems we currently face?

75 per cent unemployment: Only one in four (27 per cent) of blind and partially sighted people of working age is in employment, largely unchanged in the last ten years.

Employers' attitudes: Nine out of ten employers rate blind and partially sighted people as either "difficult" or "impossible" to employ.

New Deal for Disabled People: Interventions designed to assist disabled people into work are generally not supporting blind and partially sighted people. This is often because not enough specialist provision is made for people with sight problems in terms of accessible computer technology and specialist rehabilitation and training services.

Awareness of the Access to Work scheme: 74 per cent of employers remain unaware of support available through the Access to Work scheme, which can help blind and partially sighted people into work.

Supported employment: There are 22,000 disabled people on the Workstep programme, which provides supported employment. Only 600 of them are blind or partially sighted.

What are we calling for?

New Deal for Disabled People:

- Contractual arrangements with job brokers for specialist knowledge and support to ensure that existing programmes support blind and partially sighted people.
- Rehabilitation and training programmes must be adequately funded so that they meet the needs of blind and partially sighted people.
- Supported employment opportunities and paid work in specially created temporary jobs must be developed and promoted to help long-term unemployed people back into work.
- **Access to Work:** Increase the budget for the Access to Work scheme to cope with the increased demand which is likely to result from the extension of the Disability Discrimination Act and advertise all elements, especially those that are not related to equipment.
- **Supporting newly disabled people in work:** We would like to see legislation introduced to support Disability Leave, a scheme designed to give people who develop a disability time away from work to adjust and learn new working methods, meaning they stay in work and do not lose their jobs.

8. Access to communications

What are the problems we currently face?

Television services remain largely inaccessible to people with sight problems due to the low level of audio description targets.

Essential **access services**, such as Electronic Programme Guides, are inaccessible.

What are we calling for?

- The audio description targets for broadcasters must be raised to 50 per cent.
- Equipment and services such as Electronic Programme Guides must be made accessible to all through inclusive design.
- Community radio for blind and partially sighted people must be expanded to ensure greater access to news, leisure and other information that otherwise can take days or weeks to become accessible. VIP on Air in Scotland is currently the only station broadcasting in Europe.

Three thousand people in your constituency will be judging you on how you address issues affecting people with sight problems. Please contact RNIB, Action for Blind People, Guide Dogs or NALSVI (see back cover) for further information. We look forward to working with you.





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