

Social Distancing

How to support people who are blind or partially sighted to participate in everyday life

As our society emerges from the COVID-19 lockdown restrictions, we are all learning and adapting to new measures that will help us to resume our everyday activities including shopping, commuting, employment, travel and recreation. These include social distancing and the reorganisation of some public spaces. They affect every area of life, from our homes to streets and town centres, public transport, the workplace, and leisure spaces.

Blind and partially sighted people have told us that they find social distancing more difficult to maintain, and this can cause anxiety. There is a risk that the positive actions we are taking as a society to 'return to normal' could create barriers for people who are blind or partially sighted. It is important therefore that we work together to share information and take steps to support equality of access.

How can I recognise those who are blind or partially sighted?

Some people with sight impairment can be easily recognised: they may use a cane which can vary in size and colour, wear dark glasses, have a guide dog, carry an identification card, or wear a badge, and/or lanyard. However, this may not always be the case. Some people may not use a visible aid. Therefore, we all have a responsibility to be aware that a person could have a visual impairment that is not immediately obvious.

What sort of challenges do those who are blind or partially sighted face?

- Difficulty judging distances;
- A need to be guided, making it difficult to comply with social distancing requirements;
- Being unable to see temporary markings to illustrate distance;
- Being unaware of the existence of a queuing system, or where a queue begins or ends;
- Inability to identify seating restrictions resulting from social distancing requirements;
- Being unable to locate or read hand and general hygiene signage;
- Their visual impairment may mean it is not possible for them to wear a face covering in every circumstance;
- Navigating changes to the physical layout of shops e.g. sanitising stations, cashier screens, floor indicators, temporary barriers, recognising and responding to temporary signage;
- Navigating changes to public spaces e.g. expansion of pavement cafes, additional street signage and pop up cycle lanes;
- Guide dogs are not trained to socially distance.

These challenges make social distancing almost impossible for blind and partially sighted people.

It is therefore everyone's responsibility to ensure a safe distance is maintained at all times, and to be kind and supportive by sharing information and directions about potential obstacles in the environment.

Key ways you can help

Be Aware | Be Kind | Offer Help

- **Be aware** that a person who seems to be encountering some difficulty may have a visual impairment, even if this is not obvious.
- **Be kind** to the person: don't ignore them, don't push past them.
- **Offer help** but always ensure you make your presence known first e.g. introduce yourself and offer assistance.
- Always afford a blind or partially sighted person the required social distance. Offering verbal instructions may be helpful in certain circumstances e.g. raising awareness of a one-way system in operation, or restricted seating on public transport.
- Never make physical contact with a blind or partially sighted person without seeking their consent.
- It is permissible to help anyone who is vulnerable, at risk or who needs support, including guiding for people with sight loss.
- If you are guiding a blind or partially sighted person, public health advice still applies, and you should limit the amount of time spent less than 2 metres apart. Wear a face covering and if possible, a fresh pair of single use disposable gloves, but always ensure that you maintain good hand hygiene and sanitation practices.
- In a waiting area, if seating is arranged to allow for social distancing, assist the person to find a suitable seat.
- When queuing, be careful not to block the path of someone who is blind or partially sighted.

How to approach a guide dog owner

- **Saying "hello"**. Never be afraid to approach or speak to a guide dog owner. Many will appreciate the conversation or support. However, if concentrating, or in a hurry, they may not always have time to talk.
- **Harness on means hands off**. A guide dog in harness means "I'm working". Do not distract a working guide dog. Petting can take the dog's focus off its partner and the potential for injury increases. If you're walking your pet dog and you approach a guide dog, always keep your pet dog on a lead, to avoid distraction.
- **Contain your excitement**. Always seek permission from the guide dog owner before approaching a guide dog. Staying calm is part of their job.
- **Don't feed a working guide dog**. Offering food to the dog can result in disruptive behaviour like begging for food and scavenging off the ground.

More information

For up to date information on Northern Ireland's COVID-19 regulations and guidance, please visit the NI Direct website at the following link:

<https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/coronavirus-regulations-guidance>

This information has been developed in partnership between RNIB Northern Ireland, Guide Dogs NI and Health and Social Care. These guidelines have been informed by the following:

Guide Dogs, "Covid-19 Recovery Guidance and Documentation: Working with a Client or Volunteer Person to Person".

Guide Dogs, "Information and guidance for people with vision impairment on the use of face coverings in England".

RNIB, "Sighted Guiding and Support Bubble Guidance".

RNIB, "Use of Face Coverings (England only)".

The National Council for the Blind of Ireland (<https://www.ncbi.ie/>)

The Canadian National Institute for the Blind (<https://cnib.ca/en/sight-loss-info/covid-19-resources/physical-distancing?region=gta>)

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