**Sighted Guiding in the Countryside**

This document has been produced to provide sighted guides with information on how to guide someone who is blind or partially sighted on a non-conventional walking route such as a countryside walk.

We will look at communication, general principles of sight loss, good guiding practice, potential dangers and how to overcome them.

# **Meeting and Communicating**

**What to ask**

Experience of walking, eye condition and how it affects their vision, whether they use a cane or dog, strength/stamina, transport, any concerns they may have. Find out their level of experience and what grade of walks they would like to join.

**Meeting in person**

Remember to always introduce yourself by name, blind or partially sighted people will not be able to recognize you and will be expecting you to find them.

Meeting somewhere recognizable- remember they will likely come by public transport or by taxi. When arranging to meet the VI walker, try to come up with a place to meet that you both know or that a taxi driver would be able to find easily. The bus stop on the corner of Corner of Church Street just outside the Shop for example would a good landmark. Just The lay by on the A419 would be a bad example.

Use of language – there is no need to talk any differently than you would to anyone else, for example, did you see Corrie last night is perfectly acceptable. Blind and visually impaired people do not want to be talked to any differently. Try to keep the general conversation the same as you would anyone else.

Saying goodbye! If for any reason you must leave the area where the blind or partially sighted person, for example to go to the bathroom, then let them know that you are leaving and re-introduce yourself when you get back. It can be embarrassing for the blind person to continue a conversation when there is no one present.

If stopping for a picnic, try to keep the area as clear as possible, picnic baskets and blankets can be trip hazards.

## **Introduction to Sight Loss**

If you imagine your eye as a polo mint, the peripheral vision would be the mint and the central part would be the hole in the middle of the mint. The peripheral vision is what we use to see what is around us, and the central part is what we see detail with.

**What is Central Vision Loss?**

Central vision loss is the loss of the middle part of the visual field, it can be caused by a whole range of different conditions. Someone with central vision loss may experience the following:

* May not see details well, if at all. An example of this would be someone could see the outside of a clock but will not be able to see the numbers or the hands.
* They will be able to see the outline of a person's figure but may not be able to see what they look like.
* They will likely be able to see what is around them but not be able to see the colours or detail of what is around.
* They might see a bus coming but may not be able to see the number of the bus.
* They might be able to spot a coin on the floor but after moving to pick it up can no longer see it.

All these issues are caused by the fact that the middle part of the patient’s vision is diminished but the peripheral vision is still 'in-tact'. It may not be perfect, but it can still be used to do many everyday tasks and to move around relatively freely.

**Conditions that can cause central vision loss include.**

 - Wet Macular Degeneration

 - Dry Macular Degeneration

 - Optic Neuropathy

**What is Peripheral Vision Loss?**

Peripheral vision loss relates to the outer part of the visual field and is the part of the vision that we use to see everything that is around us. Someone with peripheral vision loss may experience the following:

* They may struggle to move around freely, especially in busier areas.
* They may not see things on the immediate left- or right-hand side.
* They may not be able to see things in the distance such as buses coming or displays at a train station.
* They may still however be able to read.

**Conditions that cause peripheral vision loss**

 - Retinitis Pigmentosa (RP)

 - Glaucoma

**What is total blindness?**

Total blindness is not common amongst the blind and VI Community. The word ‘total’ relates to lack of any vision at all and would generally mean black out. There would be no perception of anything, including light.

You are likely to find that people with no sight at all have become very used to moving around with their usual walking aids and can sometimes even use echolocation (although this is less common).

**Other sight conditions and their effect**

* Diabetic Retinopathy - caused by complex issues with diabetes, the effects include a loss of vision across the visual field and can appear to be patchy.
* Hemianopia - experienced from having a stroke, either the left or right side of the visual field in both eyes is diminished. If you imagine dividing the eye into 4 pieces, then if pieces 1 and 3 are affected then pieces 2 and 4 will not be and vice-versa.
* Cataract - cloudy vision caused by a deterioration of the lens of the eye, cataracts can be treated with a simple operation.

### **Different types of mobility aid**

Blind and visually impaired people use a variety of different aids for mobility. These are some of the most common:

* **Long Cane**

Used to sweep the ground, often constant contact but can be lifted to double tap. Used with a roller ball tip to give tactile and haptic feedback.

* **Guide Cane**

Used to identify obstacles such as the depth of a drop kern.

* **Symbol Cane**

Used as an indicator to let other people know the person has sight loss. Not used to touch any surface or guide in any way.

* **White walking stick**

A standard walking stick but white in colour to indicate the person has sight loss.

* **Guide Dogs**

Will potentially accompany the walker but will not be of much use with guiding. Most guide dogs are trained in urban areas and will not be able to follow a rural route. There will also be lots of distractions for them. The owner will likely either let them free run or walk on the lead.

* **Ramble Tag**

When rambling, the most used method is with some sort of tether. There is a tether called a rambler tag, this is attached to the guide and the person be guided will hold on to the other end. This allows the person being guided to feel and follow changes of direction.

* **Walking Poles**

Others have used walking poles to achieve the same outcome as with a tag, also very useful for stability and balance.

#### **Principles of Guiding**

**Grip and starting point.**

On a typical walk that is not through a countryside route, the person being guided should have their hand on either the guides elbow or shoulder. This allows for movement and change of direction to be felt quickly and therefore adjustments made with ease. The grip should be the ‘C’ grip, if you make a C shape with your hand, this is then wrapped around the guide’s elbow. VI walkers will follow roughly half a step behind.

**Narrow Walkways**

If you need to navigate a narrow pathway the guide should bring their arm around their back and straighten it up, detailing this to the walker before doing so. The walker should then follow behind and in-line with the guide.

**Terrain**

With any walk there is always a slight change in surface, but with country walks this is going to be more prevalent. Here are some things to look out for:

* Blind and partially sighted people will not be able to tell that there is an upcoming incline.
* Cobbled paving can be difficult to walk on
* Loose stoned paving can cause loss of balance.
* Grass and mud paths can be uneven, and divots can create a trip hazard.
* Wet mud paths can be slip hazards.

**Pace**

It is important to maintain a steady pace with the person you are guiding, as changing pace too quickly can be disorientating. If you feel they may wish, and be able to go quicker, then ask the question, is this pace ok? If you notice that the walker is pushing slightly on your arm, this could indicate they are comfortable and may wish to go quicker. Vice-versa, if you notice a pull, that could mean they are feeling slightly anxious and wish to slow down.

**Overhanging Obstacles**

Trees and over hanging foliage can cause big issues, most people will not pick up on them until it is too late. You can either navigate around to avoid them or duck underneath them. Make the person aware of the issue just before you come to it and tell them you are moving around something or ask them to duck. They may wish to put their hand on your shoulder to feel how far you have ducked down so they can do the same. Keep moving forward in the ducked position until you have cleared the obstacle and be sure to tell them when you have.

**Steps**

When approaching any steps it is important to guide the person to the top of the steps and make sure that they are safely at the first step before accending or descending. Blind and partially sighted people will typically use the heel of their foot to find the steps. If there is a handrail, ensure they know where it is and guide there hand to it if needed.

Walk ahead of the person you are guiding and let them know when you are at either the top or the bottom. Do not count the steps. When you have reached the end of the steps you can continue guiding as normal.

Blind and partially sighted people will not know these hazards are coming up and they may well cause issues. If they are described well, using a clock face for directions, then these obstacles can be overcome. Try not to warn of impending obstacles too early, the person you are guiding will have that on their mind and it will stick there until you have passed. You should tell the VI walker as you approach the obstacle, so they will react as you do.

**Surroundings**

If there is something of interest such as a tree or skyline that might be of interest to the person you are guiding, try to give a description of it. Use clear but imaginative words to bring the scene to life. It is good to check if they want this or not, and some people may even ask you to ‘draw’ the outline/shape by guiding their hand in the air. Imagine you are describing the scene whilst on the phone, the person on the phone will not be able to see it so you would need to use good descriptive language, this is the same for someone with low vision.

**Light**

Changes is light can cause a quick alteration in the quality of someone’s ‘useful vision’. If you are coming into an area where it is light, but you are about to walk through a shaded patch, slow down a touch and make the person aware that this is the case. They will have a coping strategy such as squinting or moving the peak of a cap lower. For many, nighttime means near total sight loss, so try to ensure your walks finish in daylight.

**Individuality**

It is important to remember that no matter what happens, everyone is different, and some people will like one way of doing something, others will like another. Get to know the person you are guiding; ask how they would like to be guided. Do not worry about asking too many questions, it is better to get it right by asking the questions than get it wrong and be uncomfortable.

**Overall, it is important to have a basic understanding of what the blind or VI walker wants or needs to walk successfully. Ask questions, learn from each other but overall, enjoy the walk together.**

If you would like further support with guiding a visually impaired or blind walker, please contact marc.gulwell@sightsupportwest.org.uk / 0117 322 4885