

**Sight**  
SUPPORT



Working in partnership:  
Sight Support West of England,  
Wiltshire Sight and  
Insight Gloucestershire



Winter / Spring  
**2025**

Keeping you informed of local sight loss news

# Welcome

We're excited to bring you the latest issue of Visible, marking our first joint edition as three local sight loss charities working together. By creating one magazine, we're able to save time and resources, allowing us to focus more on the support we provide.

In this edition, you'll find a helpful overview of long canes, including the different types available and an introduction to smart canes. We also explore the benefits of socialising with others who have sight loss and offer a closer look at our own social groups - what to expect and how they can make a difference. Additionally, we dive into how Audio Description can help you continue to enjoy watching TV, even if it's something you thought might no longer be possible.

We're always eager to hear your thoughts, so do send us your feedback and any suggestions. If you'd prefer to receive this magazine by email or on a USB stick, just let us know - our contact details are on the back page.

Best wishes,  
Mike Silvey



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# Meet The Volunteer

**Name:** Robin Stephens

**Volunteer Role:** Social Group Facilitator, Trustee, Event Support and anything else that's needed!

**Date Started:** February 2022

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I am married with two grown-up daughters and have lived in Salisbury for about twenty years. I retired a couple of years ago after a really interesting career in oceanography. I worked in the oil, gas and offshore wind industries, which gave me the opportunity to travel extensively and work with all sorts of fascinating people. I have a pretty wide range of active interests including sailing, which is my greatest passion, cycling and playing the piano and violin. My biggest challenge is finding enough time to devote to each interest!

With Wiltshire Sight, I am mostly involved in helping with the social group in the Salisbury area. This involves setting up tables and chairs, making teas and coffees and chatting with people. I occasionally help fundraise, read for people, assist with training on visual aid devices and help at various events. I have also recently become a Trustee of the organisation.

My dear late father, Gordon, had been severely visually impaired from the age of nine, when his home was destroyed by a bomb during the war. It also killed his mother and grandparents. I therefore grew up intimately attuned to the particular needs and challenges of visual impairment from my father and some of his friends. He was the most patient person that I've ever met, and I have always tried to be like him. When I retired, I was keen to utilise some of my past experience to help other people locally.

I love the buzz and camaraderie of our Salisbury social group meetings, and the really positive and light-hearted attitude of many of those who come along. If you are thinking of volunteering, I would say come along and get stuck in! You shouldn't feel shy or anxious. We all have different talents and expertise to contribute. The work as a volunteer is really rewarding.

# News And Events

## Eye Can

Bristol Eye Can was a great day – despite the October weather! Highlights included our ever-popular Q and A session with Amar Shah, a Sight Support Trustee and leading optometrist, who answered even the trickiest questions. Visitors and exhibitors alike expressed how helpful and informative they found the event.

The next events are 2nd April in Salisbury and 16th October in Bath. We'll send out invites and full details nearer the time.



## Talking News

Have you signed up to your local talking newspaper yet? Each area is covered by its own independent talking news, with volunteers committed to helping local VI people keep up to date with everything going on in your local community.

To find your nearest talking newspaper, give us a call or go online to <https://find.mytn.uk/>



## Be careful with magnifiers

A lot of our clients have very powerful magnifiers at home. We wanted to share a reminder to always make sure that magnifiers are kept away from direct sunlight – covered with a dark protective cover if needed. Even at this time of year, magnifiers can be a fire risk if left in full sun. We strongly recommend that you do not leave magnifiers unattended in sunny rooms such as conservatories.



## Quiz Night

Huge thanks to our Audio Library volunteer Alice for organising a quiz night to raise funds for Wiltshire Sight. This is part of the fundraising with the Omnes Ad Unum church society in Devizes this year – they’re hoping to raise more than £2,000 for Wiltshire Sight this year. Teams of quizzers had a brilliant time, and we were especially thrilled to welcome teams from our Devizes social group and our Devizes shop.



## Trustees

Would you like to get more involved in the oversight of our charity? We are looking for experienced people – ideally people living with sight loss – to join the Wiltshire Sight board. Please get in touch to find out more.



## Increasing technology support

Technology has always been at the heart of what we do but has become even more important in recent years. So, we are excited to be expanding our digital support service in Wiltshire. This new service will include additional training opportunities, and recruiting a team of Tech Volunteers across the county, ready to provide information, encouragement and guidance to help you get – and stay – online. We’ll be able to offer support with all kinds of technology, such as using a smartphone, the benefits of a smart speaker, online shopping, and anything else you want to know how to do.

## Our new Hubs

Since we launched our nine new sight loss advice hubs across the county in January 2024, we have already had 343 attendances from people seeking advice and guidance (to the end of September). We are delighted these are proving popular, and have recently launched a tenth hub in Nailsworth, which will run on the third Wednesday of each month.

## Volunteers wanted!

Whatever your skills, experience and interests we could really use your help. We have a wide variety of roles – in our office, at social groups and at fundraising events. Volunteering can be really rewarding, help build new skills and makes a huge difference to the work we can do. We have a range of volunteer roles on our website to give you some ideas of how you can help.

## Barnwood

We are really excited to have received three-year funding from Barnwood Trust. This support will enable us to keep delivering our information, advice and guidance to visually impaired people in Gloucestershire.

## Out on the bus!

We are delighted to have been working with the NHS information bus in locations across the county. We visited Dursley, Tewkesbury, Kingsway, Nailsworth and Cirencester, giving people the chance to meet with a Sight Loss Advisor and learn more about the support available.



## Client Advisory Group

We are continuing to look for clients in Gloucestershire who would like to join our CAG. This friendly group discuss issues affecting local VI people and give advice to the Trustees and managers of our charities. Please call or email the office if you are interested in joining.

# Sight Support West of England News

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## Meet our new Advisor

Jessica Hudson has joined our team as the new CSLA for Bath and the surrounding area. Jessica first got to know Sight Support as a client at the Bath hub. Loving it so much, she soon signed up to volunteer, and in September 2024, she became a Community Sight Loss Advisor.

With a background in media and a passion for creative technology, she's always been driven to find innovative solutions to challenges. Her own experiences with visual impairment have given her a deep empathy for others, and she's committed to helping them live more independent lives.



## Digital & Technology courses

Our next round of taster, intro and intermediate tech classes are starting in February. Find out what a smart speaker is or how you could use a smartphone to make life easier. Hone your skills, or just keep practising. Please contact the office to find out more.



## Bath Christmas Market

We were thrilled to have a stall at Bath Christmas Market this year. Local company Inspecs generously donated products for us to sell and raise money and provided volunteers to make it possible. The Christmas Market is one of the biggest and most high-profile events in our region, and we are so grateful to be able to raise our profile in this way.

# In Good Company



Having lived with sight loss from a young age, forming and maintaining friendships has been a complex part of my life. From practical challenges like getting to social events, to not fully accepting my condition, my sight loss led to feelings of isolation. For example, engaging in conversations when I couldn't tell if someone was addressing me affected my confidence, and I often felt anxious about attending social events due to concerns about navigating venues. For a long time, my sight loss held me back.

This gradually changed, but joining social groups at my local sight loss charity became a real turning point. I discovered that I wasn't alone in facing these challenges and that a fulfilling life with sight loss was possible.

Being in a space where other people 'got it' and truly understood my experience was transformative. Connecting with people who shared similar struggles not only gave me a sense of belonging but also helped me to find my voice. I began to advocate for myself more confidently and found it easier to explain to sighted people, whether family, friends or acquaintances, how they could assist.

Research echoes my experience. An RNIB study found that blind and partially sighted people are more likely to feel lonely or lack companionship compared to the general population. But as I found, connecting with others



who share similar experiences helps form friendships and can build a sense of community, which is a foundation for an improved outlook.

For me, it wasn't just about finding people who understood but also learning from them. I gained invaluable tips on daily living that made my life easier. Whether practical advice, learning about local events or seeing how others dealt with misconceptions about visually impaired people, it all helped me develop stronger coping strategies. I also gained confidence from seeing others live full, happy lives with visual impairments. It gave me hope that my sight loss didn't need to hold me back. Knowing I wasn't the only one facing these challenges made them feel less overwhelming.

Perhaps one of the most surprising benefits for me has been the ability to laugh about some of the challenges that come with sight loss. This doesn't negate the very real issues that exist, but in a space where others understand what it's like, and with less chance of being pitied or misunderstood, it felt safe to share frustrations and even make light of them. That shared humour has been integral to making my challenges feel smaller and manageable and to putting things into perspective. The ability to laugh with others about mishaps, like misjudging distances or missing a visual cue, has given me a lighter approach to any daily struggles.

When you're feeling isolated, it's easy to fall into a loop of disconnect, where trying new things feels overwhelming. That sense of isolation might make you feel resigned to being less connected with others. But it doesn't have to stay that way. At many of our sight loss advice hubs, we've created friendly, supportive social groups where you can connect with others who understand the challenges. You can read more about our social groups in the next article.

If you'd like to speak with someone about anything in this article, our advisors are here to help.

Written by Karen, our Marketing and Communications Officer.



# A Friendly Sight: Our Social Groups

Attending a social group might not be something you've considered, but people tell us it really makes a difference in their lives. Our social groups offer a welcoming space to connect with others living with sight loss who understand the challenges often faced. Beyond sharing experiences and helpful tips, these gatherings provide an opportunity to build friendships and enjoy good company. Plus, they're a lot of fun!



“ It was lovely to mix with other VI people and after the session I really felt alive for the first time in ages. ”

## Where We Meet

Across the regions we serve, we have nearly 30 social groups, with more added regularly. Some are standalone groups but many of these take place alongside our monthly sight loss advice hubs. While seeing an advisor at a hub may be possible by making an appointment or dropping in at a set time, all our social groups are open for you to drop in at any time during their scheduled hours. So if you're attending a hub, why not pop into its social group?



It's a relaxed, friendly space where you can find both helpful support and peer connection. Partners or carers are welcome at all our hubs, as well as any friends interested in volunteering.

## What to Expect at a Social Group

Our social groups are led by dedicated volunteers, many of whom have visual impairments themselves. You'll receive a warm welcome, with someone there to introduce you to the group, ensuring you know who's present even if you can't see them easily. You can relax, enjoy a tea or coffee and biscuits, and take your time getting to know others. Group sizes and atmospheres may vary, but whether lively or more intimate, you'll always be met with a friendly face.

Some groups offer structured activities, like guest speakers, topics for discussion or specific equipment demonstrations from a supplier, while others are all about conversation and companionship. If you're attending for the first time and feeling a bit nervous, don't worry, we understand that anxiety of "where will I sit?" or "will anyone speak to me?", but everyone is incredibly supportive and will make you feel welcome. Letting us know in advance if you plan to attend helps us ensure a smooth introduction and we can arrange for someone to greet you when you arrive.

**“ It's a weird thing but the only people who can make me laugh about being blind are the get-togethers with other blind and visually impaired people... I have often carried on laughing for a long time afterwards as well. ”**

## Virtual Hubs: Support from Home

We recognise that attending an in-person group isn't always feasible. That's why we've launched virtual hubs – online communities for specific user groups where you can connect with others who understand what you're going through, all from the comfort of your own home. These hubs meet via Microsoft Teams, and each session is hosted by a volunteer with lived experience of sight loss. You're free to join whenever it suits you – there's no pressure to attend every session.



Currently, we offer four groups: Young Adults (18 to 30 years), Working Age individuals (25 to 70 years), Parents of Children with Visual Impairment, and University Students. We're keen to expand these options, so if you have suggestions for new specific interest hubs, let us know.

# Seeing Beyond the Scene

## Navigating the World of TV Audio Description

If you love settling down to catch the next episode of your favourite show, you may find it frustrating when you miss out on the action that's happening on screen. When you are living with sight loss it can be challenging keeping up with all the visual details, but there's a solution that can bring the story to life: Audio Description.

Audio Description bridges the gap by providing extra commentary on what's happening visually. Here are some tips on how to get it set up and make the most of it. And remember, if you need more help, your local Sight Loss Advisor is here to support you.

### What is Audio Description?

Audio Description is an additional spoken commentary that describes important visual elements on screen, such as movements, settings, facial expressions and body language.

This description is given between the dialogue and helps paint a clearer picture of the action for those who may not be able to see it.



### How Do I Access Audio Description?

Turning on Audio Description varies slightly depending on your TV or device, but once it's set, it will stay enabled for live channels until you turn it off. Here's a basic guide; 1: Go to your TV's settings menu. 2: Look for 'Accessibility.' 3: Find the 'Audio Description' option and toggle it to the 'On' position.



### What About Streaming Services?

Many streaming platforms like Netflix, Amazon Prime, Apple TV and Disney+ offer Audio Description. To enable it; 1: Choose your show and start playing it. 2: Open the audio and subtitles menu (usually an icon that looks like a speech bubble or text box). 3: Select 'Audio Description.' For Netflix; 1: Start your programme and click into the screen. 2: Select 'Other' and scroll to choose 'English Audio Description.'

## How Do I Know Which Programmes Have Audio Description?

Currently, only 10% of TV programming is legally required to have Audio Description, but efforts are underway to increase availability. When you enable Audio Description on your TV, programmes with this feature will be marked with 'AD' in the electronic TV guide.

BBC iPlayer and Channel 4 make it easier by offering an 'Audio Described' category right on their homepages, where you can browse all shows with Audio Description.

## TV Checklist – things to consider

In addition to Audio Description, here are a few simple checks that can improve your TV viewing experience:

1. Are you having trouble seeing the screen because the contrast or brightness is too low?
2. Would a bigger screen make a difference?
3. Can you move your chair a bit closer to the TV?
4. Is glare or reflection from windows or lamps affecting the screen?
5. Would headphones help you hear better?
6. Struggling with the remote? Try using colourful or raised tactile markings to make it easier to navigate. There are also specially designed easy to see and navigate remote controls which might work with your TV.



## MaxTV Glasses

Some people find MaxTV Glasses helpful for watching TV, offering hands-free 2.1x magnification with adjustable lenses for each eye. A clip-on version is also available for prescription glasses. Talk to your Sight Loss Advisor to see if they're right for you.

With tools like MaxTV Glasses, Audio Description, or TV adjustments, there are ways to enhance your viewing experience and stay connected to the shows you love.

# What White Cane?

If getting around safely is becoming more challenging, it might be time to consider using a white cane. Canes not only assist with navigation but also signal to others that you may need extra space or support. From busy high streets to quiet footpaths, the right cane can make a difference in your confidence and independence.

## Choosing the Right Cane

The best cane for you will depend on your level of sight loss and specific needs. A specialist or rehabilitation officer can guide you through the options. If you are also hard of hearing, red stripes on your cane will indicate this to others.



**Symbol Canes** are ideal for those in the early stages of sight loss who retain usable vision. Lightweight and small, they are held across the body to let others know you have sight loss. These canes are not intended for guiding but are a helpful indicator in busy places.

**Guide Canes** are suited to those who need occasional support to detect immediate obstacles, such as steps or kerbs. Sturdier and longer than a symbol cane, a guide cane allows someone to tap the floor or objects like lampposts to navigate around them safely. Guide canes are good for those who need guiding help now and then but don't require a cane to find everything.

**Long Canes** are designed to help people with severe sight loss move confidently and safely. Using a sweeping or tapping motion, a long cane scans the environment and detects obstacles, landmarks and changes in surface. It's also great in busy areas, where others are more likely to give you space.

## A Closer Look at Long Canes

Long canes are designed for independent navigation. They extend from the ground to between your breastbone and chin when held upright and have a grip at the top. These canes can be folding or rigid in style and come with a variety of tips to match preferences and terrains.

- **Aluminium Canes:** Known for durability, these canes are commonly used in training and provide a reliable option for everyday use.
- **Graphite Canes:** Lighter than aluminium, these can offer more comfort, especially for longer use.
- **No-Jab Canes:** Featuring a retractable design, these canes absorb shocks, reducing jolts when they strike objects and bouncing back once past an obstruction.
- **All-Terrain Canes:** Made from titanium, these are perfect for off-road explorers or beach walks. They offer added stability and can even double as a walking pole on rougher ground.
- **Smart Canes:** With built-in technology, smart canes enhance navigation and obstacle detection. Some connect with smartphones for turn-by-turn directions, public transport updates, and information on nearby locations. Models like the Ultra Cane or WeWALK cane offer vibration feedback and even link to Bluetooth headphones for audio guidance; ideal in busy environments.



## Additional Tools



Several smartphone apps are available to aid navigation, with or without a cane. Google Maps and Apple Maps offer standard turn-by-turn directions, while Moovit assists with public transport. For more advanced audio guidance, Soundscape (VoiceVista) and Lazarillo help with navigation in complex environments like shopping centres or airports. Many of these apps pair with a smart cane, giving you an extra layer of support.

To learn more about canes or find the best option for you, speak to your local Sight Loss Advisor. They can help with referrals for specialist training and guidance on making the most of your chosen mobility aid.

# Benefits and Allowances:

## A Gateway to Financial Support

For people living with sight loss, managing daily costs can be an additional challenge. If you're concerned about your finances, it's a good idea to arrange a benefits check-up with organisations like Age UK or Citizens Advice. There are a wide range of benefits and allowances available that can ease financial pressures and open doors to further support.



Certain benefits not only provide immediate financial help but also unlock access to other support services, which is why they're called "gateway benefits." These include, at the time of writing, Pension Credit, Universal Credit, Working Tax Credit and Employment & Support Allowance.

By receiving one of these benefits, you may become eligible for additional help such as:

- Winter Fuel Allowance
- Council Tax discounts
- Free NHS prescriptions
- Housing Benefit



This means that even if the benefit itself seems small, it can lead to further support that can significantly improve your financial situation.

## Support During Winter Months

Winter Fuel Payments help with heating costs during colder months. Recently, the government changed the eligibility criteria, and now only those receiving Pension Credit or other means-tested benefits qualify.

In addition, Cold Weather Payments are available to people on certain low-income benefits. You'll automatically receive £25 for each 7-day period when the temperature drops below freezing, if you're eligible.



## Personal Independence Payment (PIP)

PIP is a benefit for people who require additional care or have mobility challenges due to a disability. It is not means tested, but if you receive PIP, you may get additional payments (called a premium) added to benefits like:

- Housing Benefit
- Jobseeker's Allowance
- Income Support
- Pension Credit (if you receive the daily living component)
- Employment & Support Allowance (if you receive the daily living component)

## Low-Cost Telephone and Internet

If you qualify for a gateway benefit, you may be eligible for “social tariffs” for your phone and internet bills. These are fixed-term, low-cost plans offered by most utility companies. While they may not always be the cheapest, they provide consistent savings without the need to regularly shop around. For those who find it difficult to research deals, these tariffs can offer peace of mind.

## Attendance Allowance

If you've reached state pension age and need help due to a disability, such as sight loss, you could qualify for Attendance Allowance. This benefit is designed to help with extra costs when you need assistance with daily living activities. Importantly, you don't need to have a paid carer to claim this benefit – it can be used for equipment or other forms of support.

Receiving Attendance Allowance could also lead to extra payments through Pension Credit, Housing Benefit or Council Tax Reduction.

In 2025, Attendance Allowance will automatically be changed to the Pension Age Disability Payment. You'll get a letter detailing any changes.

## Carer's Allowance

If a friend or family member helps you with everyday tasks like cooking, attending appointments, shopping or managing finances for 35 hours a week or more, they might be eligible for Carer's Allowance. This benefit helps reduce financial pressure for the person supporting you, whether they are a friend, relative or partner.

Carer's Allowance also includes National Insurance credits, which help protect their entitlement to a state retirement pension.

# Our Fundraising Events

Our fundraising really grew in 2024. We are excited to have been at supermarkets, fairs and community events around the region. People have generously put money in our collection buckets, entered quiz teams, bought Christmas cards and played hook-a-duck!

Fundraising events are a great way for us to let people know about our services as well. At every event we've attended, we have met new clients and given out leaflets to people who want to know more about our services.

We would like to do even more in 2025. If you might be able to help us at an event, please get in touch with Paula in our Devizes office to find out more.

We are looking for volunteers to help at our events, or even organise events of their own.

Helping at our events could be:

- Running a tombola
- Taking drinks orders for quiz teams
- Selling small gifts or Christmas cards
- Helping children play hook-a-duck
- Running our lucky dip

If you were able to run your own event, we could help you organise a quiz night, a coffee morning or pretty much anything else you want to do – if you want to abseil, climb a mountain or try fire walking, just let us know!

One client who took part in a fundraising quiz night told us, “I was a bit unsure about taking part and very nervous. But I had such a good time, and it really helped me grow my confidence.”



**Did you know?**  
Hook-a-duck raised  
nearly £300 this  
summer!





People volunteer at fundraising events for all kinds of reasons. It's a fun way to get out in your local community. It can be a great way to boost your confidence and get talking to people. And of course, you'd be helping raise vital funds to keep our services going.

**“ I have such great fun at these events. It's lovely seeing the children enjoying our games with their parents and winning prizes. The money we raise is so important to our work. We always meet at least a couple of people who could use our services that haven't heard of us before. ”**  
– Paula, our Fundraising Assistant

## We're here for you

Our Advice team is here to help you adjust to living with sight loss and give you the tools needed to live your life the way you want to. We offer:

- Information, advice and guidance on living with sight loss, remaining independent and getting the most from life.
- Demonstration and training on a range of useful resources to help with daily living, including making the best use of magnification and lighting aids to support reading and writing.
- Advice and training in how to use smart phones, tablets and other devices to minimise the impact of your sight loss.
- Social activities and opportunities to meet others living with sight loss.

# Contact Information

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