Visual Impairment Fact sheet
Guidance for Staff working with visually impaired students across campus

Visual Impairment as a Disability
A visual impairment may mean a person has no sight at all, although this is a minority in comparison with those students who have low vision or partial sight. Most people who advise that they are blind have some vision and may be light-sensitive, may experience blurred or distorted vision or may have a restricted field of vision. With some vision impairments, sight fluctuates and students may have some days when vision or light tolerance is much better than others.

Some students have gradually lost vision over a number of years; others may have been blind since birth. Some visually impaired students may not appear any different from other students; others may use a cane or a guide dog. Access requirements of people with vision impairments will vary widely and are not always evident. The best guide to the student's condition and how it affects them is the student him/herself and you should discuss their requirements directly with them.

Although a student may have difficulty identifying detail or reading print this may not always affect their mobility around campus. However, when the peripheral vision is affected it can reduce the visual field making mobility difficult. People with decreased peripheral vision may not see images immediately to one side of them. They may have difficulty with street kerbs, steps or items left in their path. If there are problems with orientation, learning routes on campus, particularly at the start of the year is a time-consuming task. Vision also may fluctuate or may be influenced by factors such as inappropriate lighting, light glare or fatigue.

Visual impairment etiquette
• Address people by their name if known and introduce yourself. Don’t assume a person will recognise your voice. (e.g. "Hi Bill, it’s Sally…”)
• In a group situation introduce the person to other people present.
• Avoid situations where there is competing noise.
• Let the person know when you and anyone else have entered or left a room, or conversation.
• When talking to a person who is visually impaired ensure that you speak clearly in your normal speaking voice and continue to use body language. This will affect the tone of your voice and give extra information to the person who is blind or have low vision.
• Use everyday language. Don’t avoid words like “see” or “look” or avoid talking about everyday activities such as watching TV or videos.
• Use accurate and specific language when giving directions (e.g. “the door is on your left”, rather than “the door is over there”). In a dangerous situation, say “stop” rather than "look out."
• Be aware that the person may be disadvantaged by not seeing what’s going on. Describe what is happening (e.g. “Bill, I have placed your tray by your right hand”)
• If the person uses a guide dog, do not touch or feed the dog without first gaining the permission of the owner. Guide dogs are working dogs and must not be distracted or fussed over. Unless you are involved in making an arrangement to accommodate them, they should generally be ignored; eye contact is discouraged.
• If you are wondering whether a visually-impaired person needs some help, approach them and ask before doing anything. Then listen to how they want you to help them.

General issues
• Do staff know how to guide a visually-impaired person? If not, perhaps they would benefit from a brief workshop (contact the Student Wellbeing Service for further details, but Accommodation and Hospitality Service access a very good course – Welcome All).
• Not all people with little or no sight will need to use a guide, so it is important to ask what (if any) specific assistance they require. The person will accept your offer or tell you if they don’t require assistance.
• Assistance is generally:
  o describing objects or locations
  o guiding
  o or a combination of both
• Do staff always face and introduce themselves/their role to the students/visitors? The visually impaired person will not always recognise a uniform or be able to read identity badges.
• Be aware that the person may be disadvantaged by not seeing what’s going on. Describe what is happening (e.g. “I am going to give you ........ now”) You may also need to explain the need for sudden loud noises or laughter.
• Is signage across campus clear, easy to identify and read? Is there a standard scheme in use? Avoid handwritten notices as these can be difficult to read, lacking boldness, clarity and consistency.
• If you must use an locally made notice, use a black text marker on white paper. Check print size and thickness. Use upper and lowercase letters for better visibility as this gives more shape to words. Do not use capital letters only.
• Do not underline words.
• For typed print use the strongest contrast possible (e.g. black type on white paper). Arial font style above 12pt is recommended.

Physical access
• Are there contrasting edges on the steps or ramps throughout the School/Faculty? People with visual impairments often rely on contrast to negotiate obstacles. Highlighting steps with a contrasting strip makes it easier for someone doing this to see the step. It also helps if handrails contrast with the wall.
- Monocular vision can make it difficult to judge depth, speed and distance and this can make it difficult to use stairs, cross roads or manoeuvre through crowds.
- Is there adequate lighting around reception and communal areas of the School/Faculty, for example in Reception, School office, common rooms or common areas, lecture theatres, libraries, tutorial rooms and dining hall?
- Avoid major changes in lighting (e.g. a bright room leading to a dim corridor and vice versa) and try to maintain even lighting throughout buildings.
- Reduce clutter (e.g. in corridors and open spaces). Ensure chairs are pushed under tables.
- Ensure carpets have no wrinkles or tears that can cause falls.
- Glass doors should be well marked.
- If there are wet floors, tell the person who is blind or has low vision, as they may not be able to read any warning signs.

**Accommodation managers**

- Accommodate visually impaired students in rooms with extra lighting, a large desk and plenty of shelving for equipment, and bulky Braille texts; ask cleaners not to move things around as this can be very disorientating.
- Some students may need orientating to their room or immediate environment to become familiar with the location of furniture and objects.
- They may need help to work with an orientation trainer, especially in the first few weeks. The trainer will need to learn from staff the routes the student will use regularly and need guidance to prioritise them.
- Show the student important areas such as the bathroom/toilet and dining areas. Begin at their room or workstation and go to the area. Then retrace your steps.
- Is an emergency evacuation plan necessary and in place for the student? Ensure that all staff and students are aware of the evacuation plan.
- It is important that the student has adequate lighting in their room. Good lighting improves contrast; the light source should come from behind or beside the person and separate task lighting ensures that there are no shadows between the light and the text/task.
- Lighting needs differ and can be significant. Some people see better with stronger light, while others do not. The most common concern is glare. Use Venetian blinds or curtains, or tint the windows to control glare.
- Ensure communal areas have clear walkways and use contrast in rooms to identify doors, door furniture, walls, benches or changes in floor level.
- Large tactile room numbers and signs are helpful and doors should be either fully open or fully closed.
- Mark on/off buttons on appliances using contrasting colours markers, stickers or textures (e.g. Bump Ons, Velcro or paint) for easy identification. This is useful for TVs and remote controls.
- In communal kitchen areas, fully close cupboard doors. Ensure items are well organised and stored in consistent locations.
- Provide strong lighting near, or in, closets and cupboards.
• Use matt finish paints or surfaces to reduce glare.
• Contrast the colour of the toilet seat with the colour of the wall and floor.

Dining Area
Dining and eating can be stressful, embarrassing and frustrating if people cannot see the food.
• Are menu choices displayed on a board or in writing/print? In Newcastle University, some restaurant/cafés advertise their menus on a website making it easier to choose in advance. Menus are changed on daily basis and are written by hand on board so it would be difficult to produce these in different formats each day but staff are always on hand to help
• Do serving staff announce the choices in self service areas? This will make it easier for a person with a visual impairment to know what is being served.
• Do staff offer to carry the tray or guide people to a seat?
• In more formal settings, use contrasting colours (e.g. contrasting napkins and tablecloths) and appropriate lighting. Inform the person about what is on the table and where it is located (e.g. Your drink is on your right and the salt is straight in front.)
• If required, explain the location of the food on the dinner plate (e.g. “The meat is nearest to you at six o’clock, the potatoes are on the right at three o’clock, and the carrots are on the left at nine o’clock”). Meat should be placed near the person to assist with cutting.
• When filling glasses or cups, leave approximately one centimetre to help prevent spills.

Useful Contacts
Previous publications, particularly those produced by the University of Sheffield, Cambridge, Leeds and the Open University are gratefully acknowledged.

• Royal National Institute for the Blind (RNIB) have useful information on  helping people
• Action for Blind People
• The Partially Sighted Society
• DeafBlind UK
• Guide Dogs for the Blind Association