

Impact Report: Improvements to visual impairment rehabilitation services provided by Birmingham City Council

Mar 2022



Our Impact: Improving services for people with vision impairment

Healthwatch Birmingham investigated visual impairment rehabilitation services provided by Birmingham City Council. This was based on feedback from service users about their difficulties getting care and support for sight loss and visual impairment.

People told us about issues such as:

Lack of access to specialist Visual Impairment Rehabilitation Officers.

 My assessment was with a generic social worker, not a vision rehab specialist.

Confusion about who to contact for support, the registration process and referral routes.

 If they could signpost a bit better, something as simple as Focus will help you do your PIP form.

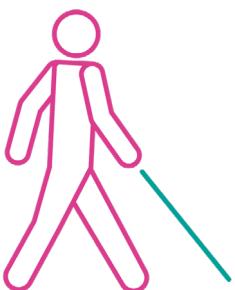
Assessments fail to take into account other issues and conditions.

 It's not the sight loss but how to adapt that is the key issue and give us the things to enable us to live life. For instance, being with people, take your dog out, go for a run.

Impersonal support that does not consider individual needs.

 Following my diagnosis, the council contacted me after a couple of weeks and sent me a registration card. The council sent me something to fill in which one of my daughters filled and then the card came after. There was no explanation of what registration meant.

In response to our investigation, Birmingham City Council has:



Recruited an additional Visual Impairment Rehabilitation Officer.

Improved information, accessibility and navigation on the council's website.

Maintained regular contact with everyone on the sight loss register, including regular wellbeing checks for those receiving a care package during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Worked with Focus Birmingham and Royal National Institute of Blind People (RNIB) to develop additional information leaflets.

Healthwatch Birmingham will continue to listen to people who use vision impairment rehabilitation services in order to drive improvement. Please share your experiences:

Visit www.healthwatchbirmingham.co.uk

Call 0800 652 5278

Email info@healthwatchbirmingham.co.uk

Introduction

Healthwatch Birmingham investigated Birmingham City Council's visual impairment rehabilitation services in early 2020. This investigation was prompted by comments from a focus group highlighting the importance of having the right support from visual impairment rehabilitation services to ensure that people have the skills to live with sight loss and maintain independence. During our investigation we spoke to 33 individuals who were either registered sight impaired or severely sight impaired and a small number who were not yet registered.

In September 2020, we published a report "What challenges do people with sight loss face accessing vision rehabilitation services in Birmingham?" The findings of the report and proposals for change were shared with Birmingham City Council. The council provided a written response to the feedback shared by those using visual impairment rehabilitation services and outlined actions to ensure the required improvements were made. These actions were included in our initial report.

You can find [the full report on the Healthwatch Birmingham website](#).

Actions Taken

By identifying the specific barriers and challenges for people with sight loss, the visual impairment rehabilitation team have implemented changes that will improve access, information, engagement and communication. This will give people living with sight loss the reassurance that their needs are central to the planning and implementation of the care and support they receive.

Improvements made by Birmingham City Council's visual impairment rehabilitation team include:

- Recruiting an additional Visual Impairment Rehabilitation Officer, who is now in post.
- Reviewing the information held on the council's website and working with appropriate colleagues to improve accessibility, ease of use and navigation. The website is currently under development and when complete will incorporate relevant information in an accessible format.
- Forming a focus group to look at generic information for citizens to ensure that it meets accessibility standards.
- Maintaining regular contact with all citizens on the sight loss register. During Covid-19 wellbeing / welfare checks were performed for all the citizens who were receiving a care package.
- Working closely in partnership with Focus Birmingham and Royal National Institute of Blind People (RNIB) to develop additional information leaflets. These set out local and national sensory impairment services and organisations with contact details in accessible large print format.
- Adapting the 3 Conversation model paperwork to ensure that interventions for people with sight loss remain person-centred.

"During the lockdown, I did get refresher long cane skills trainings that I had requested. I was grateful for this, the instructor was good, he took all steps to make me feel safe and secure, and also trained me on two different routes. I also had an assessment which matched my needs and this helped to make my house accessible for me."

Service user

As a result of these actions, service users should experience improvements to issues raised in the initial study:

- Improved access to specialist Visual Impairment Rehabilitation Officers, thereby improving the quality of care. **“My assessment was with a generic social worker, not a vision rehab specialist.”**
- Clarity about how and who to contact for support, the registration process and referral routes. **“If they could signpost a bit better, something as simple as Focus will help you do your PIP form is a big thing for someone that has just lost their sight.”**
- Better assessments and support that addresses various aspects of an individual’s life, from eye health to emotional, physical, financial and social needs. **“It’s not the sight loss but how to adapt that is the key issue and give us the things to enable us to live life. For instance, being with people, take your dog out, go for a run.”**
- A more person-centred approach based on conversation with users of rehabilitation services. **“Following my diagnosis, the council contacted me after a couple of weeks and sent me a registration card. The council sent me something to fill in which one of my daughters filled and then the card came after. There was no explanation of what registration meant.”**

Healthwatch Birmingham staff have confirmed the following changes online. During the initial study, we found it difficult to find information about vision impairment rehabilitation services in Birmingham, including the pathway and support services. We have noted that the council’s website has had some updates and there is more detailed information about the service on a partner organisation’s website. However, more changes are needed to the information available for service users, and we will continue to monitor this to ensure that the actions that the council committed to are fully implemented.

Evidence contained in the investigation report is being used as a resource for members of the Rehabilitation Workers Professional Network (RWPN). The RWPN states that the report highlights the statutory position of vision impairment rehabilitation services and the direction given by the Association of Directors of Adult Social Services (ADASS) in providing services.

We have also spoken to recent service users to understand whether their experiences have improved. Healthwatch Birmingham will continue to monitor the outstanding actions where little progress was made due to Covid-19. People we spoke to between October and November 2021 told us that change is still needed to improve the experiences of those living with sight loss:

“I have been trying to get assisted technology. There is nowhere I can go just to get training with technology. We need a specialist centre to gain skills to help us be confident when going out to work.” (Service User)

“After referral by the ECLO to the rehab service, they are still sending out forms for people who have lost their sight to complete. Unless someone has support, they are unable to do and delays access to support.” (Eye Clinic Liaison Officer)

“It’s not the sight loss but how to adapt that is the key issue.... give us the things to enable us to live life. Like, being with people, take your dog out, go for a run.” (Service User)

“What I say to people is try and make a cup of tea with your vision obscured at least in one eye, see how hard it is to pour a cup of hot water or get your tea, the right colour that you like. Just a simple daily task like making a cup of tea.” (Service User)

“From the time they are seen by an ECLO and referred to Birmingham City Council or Connect it takes a long time to have a home assessment. Mobility training also takes a long time. I spoke to two young people recently, one lost their sight suddenly and is still working but she is still waiting for mobility training for four months now. The other is pregnant, and the way things are looking, they might have to do long cane training at eight months. The longer someone is left, they lose their independence and it’s harder to get back.” (Third Sector Professional)

Next Steps

Healthwatch Birmingham will request evidence and updates from Birmingham City Council's visual impairment rehabilitation team regarding progress on the following outstanding actions:

- Completing the review of information on the council website, alongside updating the website and fact sheets using information from focus groups to ensure information is accessible.
- Evidence of adapted paperwork of the 3 Conversation Model being used by Visual Impairment Rehabilitation Officers.
- Evidence of a move away from written correspondence towards more personal and direct contact with people with sight loss following certification.
- Work in partnership with Focus Birmingham and RNIB to continue the development of referral pathways and the provision of Information, Advice and Guidance Service (IAG) and Living With Sight Loss courses to maximise a fluid and positive journey for citizens.
- Evidence of updated factsheets sent out to all registered citizens and relevant professionals such as Eye Clinic Liaison Officers (ECLOs), Low Vision Clinics, GPs and third sector professionals.
- Having a physical presence in appropriate hubs, venues and alongside ECLOs in hospitals including Low Vision Clinics.
- Sight loss awareness training for all contact centre staff who first respond to citizens and professionals contacting BCC for referrals and queries.
- Completing an overall review of the visual impairment rehabilitation service and the future structure of the visual impairment rehabilitation and sensory impairment teams.

We hope that this impact report is useful to third sector organisations such as RNIB, Focus Birmingham, Macular Society and Thomas Pocklington Trust in their work with people experiencing sight loss. We would welcome any help they can give in following up our recommendations for the changes needed to improve the experiences of those accessing visual impairment rehabilitation services in Birmingham.

We will also continue to listen to the experiences of those using visual impairment rehabilitation services. You can share your experiences by:

- Visiting our Online Feedback Centre at www.healthwatchbirmingham.co.uk
- Calling Healthwatch Birmingham on 0800 652 5278
- Emailing info@healthwatchbirmingham.co.uk
- Residents of Solihull can share their experiences of services at www.healthwatchsolihull.org.uk

Healthwatch Birmingham will request updates from Birmingham City Council regarding progress on all outstanding work. These will be reported on our website. The feedback we hear about visual impairment rehabilitation services will be shared with key stakeholders such as the Care Quality Commission and Clinical Commissioning Groups. Healthwatch Birmingham would like to thank Birmingham City Council, service users and community and voluntary organisations for their participation and involvement in this investigation.

About Us

Local Healthwatch were established in every local authority area across England following the Health and Social Care Act 2012. Our key role is to ensure those who commission, design and deliver health and social care services hear, and take into account, the public voice. Healthwatch Birmingham listens to and gathers public and patient experiences of using local health and social care services such as general practices, pharmacists, hospitals, dentists, opticians, care homes and community-based care. We hear these experiences via our Information and Signposting Line, our online Feedback Centre, and through our community engagement activity led by staff and volunteers.

You can read more about the work of Healthwatch Birmingham here:

<https://healthwatchbirmingham.co.uk/about-us/>

healthwatch Birmingham

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