

# Housing and independent living: four scoping studies

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This scoping research into the housing circumstances, experiences and aspirations of younger adults with sight loss (aged 16-44) consisted of four studies. The research was carried out by: The Campaign Company; Rocket Science UK and Nick Hopkins Consulting; Imogen Blood and Associates; and Housing and Support Partnership.

The findings from the interviews and focus groups highlight the views of participants on the aspects of their homes which influence independence and wellbeing, as well as the obstacles encountered in trying to achieve the right housing and support. The research also looked at the policy context, the variety of advice and information available and the potential to create and develop an improved range of housing opportunities.

## Selected summary findings

- For younger adults who are sight impaired, location is often more important than the physical attributes of housing, although this can depend on whether they have an additional disability. Participants considered that elements of a good location include a relatively safe neighbourhood, easy road crossings and accessibility to transport, employment opportunities and amenities.
- Family and close friends often provide a lot of support, both in the moving process and with day-to-day assistance, such as household tasks or transport. Many described the need for support before the move - to spot the 'damp patch', 'fruit flies' or unsuitable decoration, check the suitability of the area or help with the paperwork.
- Living in shared accommodation can be problematic. It presents practical and emotional risks, including challenges like kitchen utensils being moved or flat mates who lack empathy. There can also be problems with unsympathetic landlords and letting agents.



- For many, technology provides a major pathway to leading a full and independent life. This includes items such as speaking clocks and technology such as computers, apps and devices which enable them to access everyday essentials (e.g. reading signs and labels).

## Background

The estimated population of younger adults with sight loss aged 16-44 in the UK is around 88,400. There is a lack of recent research evidence or information on the housing circumstances and related views, aspirations and experiences of this group. Housing also receives little specific attention in current national policy documents, such as the UK Vision Strategy and 'See Hear - A Strategic Framework for meeting the needs of people with a sensory impairment in Scotland'.

Previous research on housing and wider social circumstances has found that younger adults with sight loss are more likely to be single and to live alone than younger adults in the general population. They are also more likely than others of their age to rent rather than start to buy their homes. Those that rent are more likely to rent from a housing association, while their sighted peers are more likely to rent from a private landlord or local authority. The rate of owner occupation has declined generally for younger adults, with a 2012 report projecting that just 18% of 18-30 year olds would be buying their homes in 2014.

## Research aims

The scoping research was designed to investigate:

- How (and how successfully) the current generation of younger adults who are sight impaired move towards independence;
- The role and significance of housing and housing-related support in this process;
- The potential for creating and developing housing opportunities.



## Experiences of research participants

- There have been recent reductions in grant funding for both general needs and supported housing in the social rented sector across the UK. With owner occupation beyond the reach of the majority of younger adults, the private rented sector (PRS) is growing. This changing context affects everyone in this age group and makes it particularly difficult for people who have a visual impairment to achieve and sustain independent living.
- The location of housing in relation to public transport, essential amenities, accessible road crossings and support networks is vital if people with sight loss are to move around without having to depend on others. It is much easier to live safely and independently in a property that is in good repair and has sufficient space for storage, equipment, guide dog etc. Security of tenure is particularly important because of the disruption and need for re-orientation and re-organisation which a move entails.
- Barriers to accessing properties in the PRS for this group include: affordability; blanket restrictions on those claiming benefits; limits to the amount of rent covered by housing-related benefits (which are particularly restrictive for those under age 35); and direct and indirect discrimination by landlords and their agents. Some research participants reported reasonably good experiences in the PRS, while others described challenges in sharing with strangers, getting landlords to agree to even simple adaptations or having to move again at short notice.
- There is a chronic shortage of social rented properties in many local areas. A common theme from interviewees was that they did not have enough points to get priority on the housing list; some had been waiting for years. The properties that become available tend to be in less desirable areas and some people described feeling particularly vulnerable to attack and abuse as a result of their visual impairment.

*'You might find the right house and it's only five minutes from school but there's a road you just can't cross independently in between.'*

*'Even if you tell them it's an assistance dog, they come up with another excuse not to allow you to have the property.'*

*'I didn't feel safe. I felt quite vulnerable there really and people didn't understand my disability... Children used to come and knock the doors... the parents weren't correcting them for doing things like that.'*

- The choice-based lettings systems now operated by many local authorities also present challenges for people with sight loss. It can be more difficult for them to make a quick decision about whether a property would be suitable and to bid for it online. Some respondents said they felt under pressure to accept any offers, even if they are unsuitable.
- Education and employment are vital in creating opportunities for younger adults to live independently. The research revealed that people often face a 'cliff edge' of loss of support at the end of their formal education and that they experience significant disadvantage in getting jobs, especially better paid jobs with security of contract.
- Changes to benefit entitlements are starting to have an impact on income and therefore on affordability of appropriate housing. Some respondents are facing the (often combined) impact of:
  - Loss of entitlement to Employment and Support Allowance (ESA), which has affected around half of people with sight loss who were previously entitled to Incapacity Benefit (IB);
  - Transition from Disability Living Allowance (DLA) to the Personal Independence Payment (PIP), with different eligibility criteria;
  - The 'bedroom tax', which reduces Housing Benefit (HB) for those deemed to have at least one spare bedroom;
  - The move from Council Tax Benefit to locally determined Council Tax Support;
  - Local Housing Allowances which restrict the amount of HB payable to PRS tenants (with a 'single room rate' payable to those under 35).
- There are very few housing advice services or resources available for younger adults with sight loss who are seeking to move to independent living. Many look to social networking sites, friends or parents to find out about their housing options. There is more advice and information available to those who are facing a housing crisis or who have lost their sight since getting their own home. However, funding cuts in the sight loss sector have reduced access to these services and, although there is information online, this can be difficult to find and to apply to personal circumstances.

*'I got the place off Gumtree (website) with some help from my friend. It's probably not that nice a place but I chose it.'*



- Most younger adults with sight loss do not need ongoing care or support, although some will require this. However, the majority do need intensive but time-limited support to find a suitable property, move into it, make minor adjustments and learn new routes around the local area. Some people get support from family and friends but it can be very difficult to obtain it from formal services, even if you are willing and able to fund it yourself.

## Ideas and potential for improving housing opportunities

Despite the challenging context, the studies identified many younger adults who have managed to achieve independent living and a range of organisations which are keen to work in partnership to meet the housing needs of this group. The good practice ideas and levers for change to emerge from the research included:

- **Brokerage:** developing existing models and agencies to provide personalised, cross-tenure housing advice, brokerage and time-limited support for people with sight loss. This would include the development of housing information resources targeted at this group and should link into and build on existing online networks.
- **Private rented sector:** improving access to (and supply of) well-managed and high quality private rented properties for this group through a social lettings model, such as that used by the Cameron Trust's Lets for Life, which purchases and/or manages housing for rent to disabled people.
- **Social housing:** influencing mainstream social housing providers to improve their allocation policies and the availability of housing-related support for people with sight loss.
- **Home ownership:** exploring ways of making home ownership more accessible for disabled people, through shared equity models and the use of disability and housing-related benefits.
- **Policy and strategy:** incorporating action to promote and support independent living in the development and implementation of national and local Vision Strategies.
- **Research:** further exploration of how education, employment and housing pathways interact for younger adults with sight loss, how they move towards independent living and the impact of benefits system changes over time.



The synthesis report from the scoping research and the reports of the four separate studies can be found on the TPT website at: [www.pocklington-trust.org.uk](http://www.pocklington-trust.org.uk).

The research was carried out by: Rosanna Post and Nick Pecorelli (The Campaign Company); Nick Hopkins, John Halliday and Alistair Grimes (Rocket Science UK/Nick Hopkins Consulting); Imogen Blood (Imogen Blood and Associates); and Ian Copeman (Housing and Support Partnership).

Please contact Thomas Pocklington Trust at [research@pocklington-trust.org.uk](mailto:research@pocklington-trust.org.uk) or Tel: 020 8090 9268 to obtain a copy of any of the reports in an accessible format.

In this publication, the terms 'people who are sight impaired', 'people with visual impairment' and 'people with sight loss' are used interchangeably.



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